TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY SHINICHIROU OTSUKA
4
The Great Journeys
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
Ex

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
Ex
4
The Great Journeys

Characters

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

Ballercy Temeglyph

Ninth among the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
The rider of a Sky Dragon, he's a sniper who shoots magic missiles from the tip of his spear.

Chisha Gold

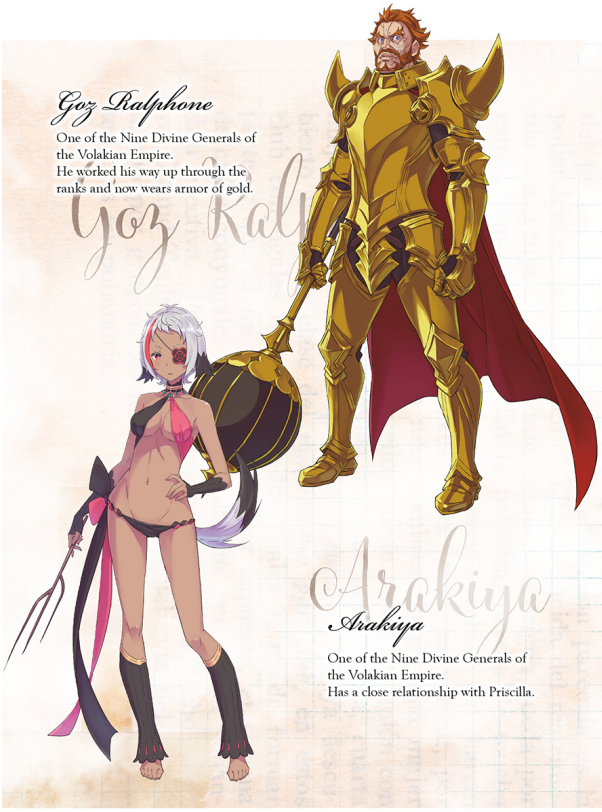
Fourth among the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
Minimal fighting prowess, but a superb military leader.

Cecils Segmund

First among the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
The Blue Lightning of Volakia.

Vincent Volakia

Seventy-seventh emperor of Volakia.
Murdered all his siblings at a young age to attain his current position.

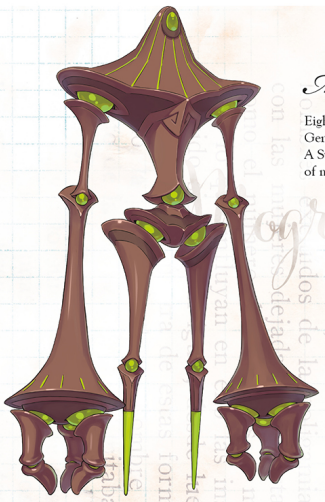


Goz Ralphone

One of the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
He worked his way up through the ranks and now wears armor of gold.

Arakiya

One of the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
Has a close relationship with Priscilla.



Mogro Hagane

Eighth among the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
A Steelfolk whose body is made of minerals.

Groovy Gumlet

Sixth among the Nine Divine Generals of the Volakian Empire.
A hyena-man who carries weapons all over his body.

"NOW THE TIME HAS COME—"

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

CONTENTS

Record of the Days Before the Royal Selection – Diplomacy by Bloodshed
First published in Monthly Comic Alive *Nos. 112, 113, 114*

Record of the Days Before the Royal Selection – The Silver Flower Dance of the Sword Saint and the Lightning
First published in Monthly Comic Alive *Nos. 115, 116*

Re:ZeRo -Starting Life in Another World- Ex

VOLUME 4

The Great Journeys

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World- Ex, Vol. 4
Tappei Nagatsuki

Translation by Kevin Steinbach
Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU Ex4 SAIYUU KIKOU
©Tappei Nagatsuki 2019
First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: September 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nagatsuki, Tappei, 1987– author. | Otsuka, Shinichirou, illustrator. | Steinbach, Kevin, translator.
Title: Re:ZERO starting life in another world ex / Tappei Nagatsuki ; illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka ; translation by Kevin Steinbach.
Other titles: Re:ZERO kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu ex. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2017.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017036833 | ISBN 9780316412902 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316479097 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304263 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975316013 (v. 4 : pbk.)
Subjects: | CYAC: Science fiction. | Time travel—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N34 Ref 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017036833

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-1601-3 (paperback)
978-1-9753-1602-0 (ebook)

E3-20200904-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Record of the Days Before the Royal Selection – Diplomacy by Bloodshed

Record of the Days Before the Royal Selection – The Silver Flower Dance of the Sword Saint and the Lightning

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

RECORD OF THE DAYS BEFORE THE ROYAL SELECTION – DIPLOMACY BY BLOODSHED

1

"There is one reason, and one reason only, as to why I've called you here." Gruff and grave, the speaker had a face like a craggy cliff. He was a large man with close-cropped green hair. His abundant muscles were sheathed in armor. The man's neck and shoulders were impossibly thick compared with those of an average person; this was someone who exuded martial spirit in a way only a trained and disciplined warrior could.

He had squeezed his great bulk into a cramped chair, a vantage point he used to gaze across a black, lacquered desk with a look that would have been enough to bring most people to their knees.

The man's name was Marcus Gildark. He was a knight of the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica and captain of the Knights of the Royal Guard. He was called the strongest in the land, a battle-tested, old war dog. The man's history and his skill with the sword left everyone in agreement that he was the second most powerful fighter in the kingdom. In other words, in terms of sheer strength, Marcus Gildark was one of the last people in the nation whose ire one would wish to arouse, but at that moment…

"Captain, please, you don't have to act so tough. Ferri may look relaxed, but he's meowy busy!"

It was shocking that anyone would dare to address Marcus with such levity. The captain's conversation partner smiled easily at him, undaunted by the stony glare that came back.

"Felix."

"Hmph! I wish you would finally start calling me Ferris, captain. 'Felix' just sounds so…*mannish*."

“It ought to,” Marcus said with a grimace. “Because you *are* a man, and it’s your name.”

The frustrated target of this rebuke was a creature with flaxen hair, as well as cat ears of the same color, and appeared to be a beautiful girl—emphasis on *appeared*.

Felix Argyle, who styled himself as *Ferris*, was a *male* knight of the royal guard who behaved like a demure young lady. Such was his true character. At the moment, he busied himself by pursing his lips at Marcus in displeasure. “I’m not a little child anymore—don’t act like you can say whatever you want to me, even if it is true. Ferri won’t like the captain if he refuses to listen.”

“You always did run your mouth. Take a lesson from the two beside you and keep it shut for once.”

“Okaaay,” Ferris said, not sounding the least bit penitent. He straightened up and glanced to either side. Two others stood flanking him, both enduring Marcus’s withering stare. One of them looked downcast, while the other was resolutely maintaining a serious expression. “Way to back me up, guys,” Ferris muttered to himself, clicking his tongue.

Marcus picked up the softly spoken words with his excellent ears, but he chose not to respond. Instead, he said, “It makes me a happy captain to have such excellent subordinates.” It was as good a way as any of skirting the subject. Marcus had straightened up and returned to the original topic of discussion. “Let’s get down to business. I’m dispatching you three as bodyguards for a very important person. Your destination is the Empire of Volakia.”

One voice raised a skeptical question. “We’re escorting a VIP? To the empire?” The speaker was purple-haired and handsome. Currently, he had one eyebrow raised doubtfully. This man had a fine face, but it wore a dubious expression. “Sir, I was under the impression that we weren’t to make any waves by making contact with the empire right now.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but that’s really above our pay grade, isn’t it, Julius? Let the brass sweat the small stuff. Any other questions?”

The handsome young man, Julius Juukulius, glanced at the knight to his right and muttered, “…I think there’s still good reason to question the choice of personnel.”

The red-haired young man standing beside him nodded and said, “I agree.

Bodyguard work is one thing, but I'm perplexed that my name would come up in connection with anything resembling diplomacy. Normally, I'm forbidden from even getting near the border."

"Nothing in the treaty specifically states that Reinhard van Astrea is barred from doing anything. More to the point, in this case, *they* asked for you."

"Did they, sir?" The young man with the red hair—Reinhard van Astrea—gave a dubious look. Julius and Ferris both seemed as perplexed as he did.

Marcus nodded at the three of them, and then with a deep, serious sigh, he added, "The emperor of the Holy Empire of Volakia wishes to see you personally."

And that was that.

2

"Reinhard, Ferris. What did you make of that conversation?" Julius asked as they left the captain's quarters in the innermost sanctum of the royal guard's barracks.

Beside him, Ferris's eyes were wide. "These are secret orders, right? Aren't you being too careless, talking about them right out here in the hallway?"

"Don't worry. The Sprouts have confirmed there's no one around. If you're still uncomfortable, go ahead and ask Reinhard for a second opinion."

"Fine, just don't expect too much from me… Yeah. The only people around are on the first floor of the barracks—or outside."

"Looks like I can expect plenty from you," Ferris said with a shrug, his ears twitching.

As it happened, Ferris hadn't really meant that remark about carelessness. He had a good deal of trust in Julius's tact and Reinhard's abilities. He had just been teasing them.

"Anyway, this isn't an invitation I'm very happy to get," he went on. "The kingdom and the empire are all but at each other's throats, and they want to see the Sword Saint? If this is a joke, it's not a funny one."

"And at this moment, of all times. If the empire pulled something on us now, it would be a major blow to the kingdom."

The history between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Empire of Volakia

stretched back a long way, and it could hardly be called friendly. The struggle between them had persisted for more than four hundred years, before the Witch of Jealousy terrorized the world. Of the four major nations that now divided the map between them, Lugunica and Volakia had the longest history, and it was one of war. They often vied for each other's territory, drawing and redrawing their borders over the centuries, and the only thing that had, at last, put a stop to it was Lugunica's pact with the Dragon.

The kingdom worked with the Dragon to seal away the Witch, and thereafter, the nation received the abundance and prosperity the Holy Dragon had promised. Their benefactor protected the country, keeping the menace of the empire at bay, leading to the dramatic cessation of hostilities.

"The catch is that peace is broken in all but name," Julius remarked. "There are still skirmishes, even after four centuries. We haven't seen any major battles, but if anything, I think the empire's ambition is burning hotter than ever."

"Yeah, and I've heard it took a lot to keep them in check during the Demi-human War. And there's also talk that the empire had something to do with the rampage of the evil dragon, Bargren, right?" Ferris asked.

"Well, they've never publicly admitted to being involved, but at the time, there were some suspicious characters lurking around the kingdom that some suspect to have summoned the rampaging dragon."

"The empire does have sky-dragon tamers. It wouldn't surprise me if they really could control the things…"

Ferris straightened up, frowning. Sky-dragon tamers were people with the ability to domesticate the creatures called sky dragons, which only the empire was said to possess. Unlike land dragons, which were mild-mannered and usually friendly toward humans, sky dragons were vicious beasts that showed no affinity for humankind. If the empire could tame monsters like that, perhaps they could force even more powerful dragons under their yoke.

"If the rumors are true, it's possible a huge army of them could attack Lugunica. Then we'd have to count on you to get rid of them, Reinhard—somehow."

"*If* it actually comes to that, rest assured I'll give every last bit of my strength to the cause," Reinhard replied. He had a wan smile, but his answer to Ferris's little joke was in earnest.

Julius watched them banter, eventually commenting, “Whatever the case, their animosity toward our country is one wound time hasn’t healed—much as it pains me to say it. And that’s just one of many things about this mission that doesn’t make sense to me.”

There was no end to the vile rumors that circulated about the empire. It would have been hopelessly naive to take them all at face value, of course. But the sheer number of them meant, objectively, that there had to be something causing all these groundless suspicions.

“I’m also disturbed that the Council of Elders would go along with the empire’s request so readily,” Julius said. “Any thoughts on that, Reinhard?”

The Council of Elders was the august body that dictated kingdom-wide policy. In practical terms, they were the head and heart of the nation. And at the moment, they occupied a crucial position as the literal lifeline of the state. It was this very council’s orders that had come down to Marcus, captain of the royal guard.

Naturally, knights of the realm were in no position to refuse such orders. But doubts were inevitable. Thus, Julius wanted to know what Reinhard was thinking, given that he was the very man named by the instructions.

Reinhard winked and said, “Sure—there’s plenty about this mission that bugs the hell out of me, too. But orders are orders. If they want my help, then I’m inclined to offer it. Obviously, if they’re plotting something, they won’t be able to keep me quiet.”

“Yes; whatever the empire may be planning, I very much doubt they intend to harm you.”

“Your position isn’t exactly optimistic, is it, Reinhard?”

Julius and Ferris, standing almost directly across from the red-haired man, glanced at each other and shrugged. The young swordsman possessed unparalleled abilities. It was a level of strength befitting the one who inherited the blessing and name of the Sword Saint. It was none other than Reinhard whose prowess in combat was unequaled in all the land, greater than even Marcus’s. In the face of his power, almost every mortal fear could be called needless, even absurd.

“The kingdom is teetering on the brink, and they send the Sword Saint along with the chief of the Council of Elders to the empire… They must have really put the screws to the captain,” Julius mused.

“Guess we’ll just have to make sure nothing goes wrong,” Ferris said

with an ironic smile.

But who were things going to go wrong for, and what sort of trouble might be waiting in the offing?

Keenly aware of the burden the coming mission brought, Julius prayed to the sky to protect the future peace of the kingdom.

3

It was a time of crisis for the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica. The ordeal had come upon them quietly but implacably; it was a crucible that would decide whether the nation endured or would be destroyed.

The beginning had come roughly four months before, with a plague that ravaged the Royal Palace. The contagion spread with fearsome speed and malice, striking down everyone who shared even a drop of blood with the Lugunica Royal Family. This left the kingdom without its king—indeed, without any royal heir. To this day, the throne continued to sit vacant.

At such a juncture, diplomacy with the Holy Volakian Empire proved to be especially important. For Lugunica, caught in these unprecedented straits, Volakia's actions would likely determine the kingdom's future existence.

"Hmm. Still, it's not a question of politics, but of the kingdom's mode of survival," murmured an old man, who stroked his long, white beard. "Our inability to reply forcefully to the empire's request can only be considered a sign of our own powerlessness."

The speaker was dressed in fine clothing and had a warm face. His appearance was especially notable due to his intelligent eyes and unmistakable facial hair: He was Miklotov MacMahon, one of the wisest men in Lugunica. If the Council of Elders was the head of the kingdom, Miklotov was the master of the council. At the moment, that made him the most important person in the nation.

Julius, sitting across from Miklotov, shook his head. "No, sir, I don't agree. The Council of Elders and all its members have done their utmost for this kingdom."

"And yet it hasn't been enough. That is all there is to it." The giant next to

Miklotov dismissed Julius's attempt at consolation. His cutting words were mostly a rebuke meant for himself rather than anyone else. And he might have been speaking the truth. After all, he, too, was a member of the council.

Bordeaux Zergev had once been among the kingdom's most celebrated warriors. Despite his many years, he remained uncommonly hale and was known for his stern opinions of both himself and others. Sitting beside each other, Bordeaux and Miklotov gave the impression of a great tree towering over an elderly plant. But they both radiated the same authority and caused Julius's stomach to tighten. These two sages were the object of this mission; they were the men Julius, Reinhard, and Ferris had been ordered to protect. They were special envoys whose role in diplomatic talks with the empire could not have been more vital.

"——" Reminded once again of the gravity of his assignment, Julius straightened up, as befitted the atmosphere in the cabin. After all, he was riding in the same dragon carriage as two members of the Council of Elders. The coach was specially made to transport those of importance. Even so, it would be charitable to call the ride comfortable. He was traveling with two of the most important people in the nation, and Julius was indeed appropriately nervous. However…

"Hmmmm? Julius, whatsa matter? Feelin' a little sick? Want some healing?"

"Not likely. This carriage benefits from the wind repel blessing, and besides, Julius is one of the best Dragon Riders in the royal guard. Don't think you need to worry about him."

"You two are never any fun."

Julius's companions sat on either side of him, chattering away as if nothing was unusual.

These three members of the royal guard were sitting across from two members of the Council of Elders. There was no way of knowing exactly what Ferris and Reinhard were really thinking, but their attitudes didn't seem like an act. They each had far more experience than Julius did when it came to dealing with such esteemed figures.

Ferris was a knight in Duchess Karsten's service, while Reinhard hailed from the family of the Sword Saints and had been inducted into the royal guard at the age of fourteen. To say their lives had been different from Julius's would be an understatement.

“And suddenly, you’re smiling, Julius; what’s up?” Ferris asked.

“Nothing at all.” Julius shrugged. “Your blasé attitude might just be my salvation. I couldn’t help thinking I’m a bit pathetic, getting wound up with nerves and worry.”

“Huh, news to me. So that means you’re capable of feeling worried?” Ferris said lightly.

“Hmph,” Bordeaux said, crossing his beefy arms. “*Worry*. A weak word. I guess the guards aren’t what they used to be.” His gaze settled on the knight’s saber that Julius carried. “A slim weapon for a slim boy. You think that’s enough to safeguard an indispensable dignitary? Let me make one thing very clear: What becomes of me is of little importance, but if anything happens to Master Miklotov, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“___”

“Don’t even have the guts to speak up for yourself? There was a time I’d have laid you out flat for an attitude like that.”

Julius simply endured Bordeaux’s tongue-lashing in silence. It wasn’t that he was overawed by the man’s position. Rather, the words had a certain truth to them. It had been a mistake to voice his concerns in front of the very men he was charged with protecting, causing them to question if they were truly safe. It would only have compounded the problem if he tried to make excuses, but above all…

“A knight of the royal guard speaks not with his words, but with his actions. Captain Marcus taught us that.”

The response came not from Julius, who remained silent, but from Reinhard. Marcus had drilled that maxim into his subordinates. And no one stayed truer to this principle than Marcus Gildark himself.

“Marcus, eh? …Razaac’s whelp has really made his way in the world.”

“Ho-ho-ho! Perhaps we should leave it at that, Master Bordeaux.” Miklotov creased his bushy eyebrows and laughed. Then his wrinkled face assumed a thoughtful expression, and he ran a hand across his beard. “We requested Captain Marcus himself to choose the personnel for this mission. I’m given to understand we have with us the pick of the royal guard.”

“You honor us,” Julius said modestly, bowing. Reinhard and Ferris likewise inclining their heads.

“Ferri thinks meowby he’s a little too idealistic,” Ferris commented under his breath.

“That’s one of Julius’s better qualities,” Reinhard replied, equally quietly. He cast a glance at the cat-boy. “It’s something I’d like to learn from him.”

Julius Juukulius was known by the nickname *The Finest of Knights*, a sobriquet that reflected both how greatly his skills were valued as well as a fitting appreciation of his service record. The bearer of the title might have been too modest to admit it, however.

“Mm. You can see the Crystal Palace now.” Miklotov acknowledged the young knights’ bows with a smile, then glanced out the window. They followed his gaze to discover a great building rising into the sky, directly in the dragon carriage’s path.

The Crystal Palace, the imperial castle of Volakia, was situated in the empire’s capital of Lupghana. Magic stones had been used in the construction of the walls, citadels, and everything else that made the castle a castle. It was a beautiful and imposing building, a symbol of both the empire’s rich magic-stone mines and its immense power.

Julius emitted an admiring sigh after seeing this building, every bit as grand as the rumors, with his own eyes for the first time. “Holy moly!” Ferris exclaimed from beside him. “I’ve heard the stories, but that castle is in *bad* taste…”

Julius took a sharp breath. “Ferris, I can’t accept that as your first reaction to seeing this building. Every inch of that castle has been carefully measured out and fashioned with the utmost care—surely, even you can see that?”

“Aw, there it is. Ferri just hates these weird fixations of yours, Julius.” Ferris put his ears back to indicate he was not interested in talking anymore. Julius winked an eye at him, provoking a hearty “Ho-ho-ho” from Miklotov.

“It may be elaborate, but it’s also remarkably functional,” the elder said. “The empire is home to some truly accomplished sculptors of magic stone. The Crystal Palace is not merely beautiful but also offers the emperor virtually impregnable defenses.”

“I’ve heard that at times of need, a single stone from the Crystal Palace can amplify magic to thousands of times its usual power… Is it true?” asked the purple-haired man.

“I wonder about that myself. If we have the chance, shall we ask His Majesty personally?”

Miklotov’s lighthearted remark caused Julius to repent of his own

childishness. Curiosity had gotten the better of him. That wasn't going to increase Bordeaux's confidence.

"I think it's true for sure that they have amazing magic-stone sculptors. I mean—you know?" Ferris, seemingly oblivious to Julius's internal turmoil, turned a pointed glance on Reinhard. The other young man half smiled and opened the collar of his uniform.

An unfamiliar metal choker hung against his pale skin. It had been made with some special technique and was set with a magic crystal that glowed faintly.

"A choker," Ferris remarked. "Now *that* says Volakian Empire to me."

"I don't know how normal this would be in the empire either," Reinhard said, touching a hand to the accessory in question. One thing was for certain: He wasn't wearing it out of choice. It was a restraint Reinhard was compelled to wear on this journey.

"A Collar of Submission, right? How is it? Does it really work on you, Reinhard?"

"It makes me feel sort of lethargic. I can't tell exactly how limited my power is, but I suppose you could say it works insofar as I clearly can't use my full abilities."

This made Julius realize how nervous the empire actually was about Reinhard. The Collar of Submission, which Reinhard had been forced to wear, was less an item that limited the wearer's abilities than one that curtailed his freedom. It practically bordered on slavery. Frankly, to demand that someone invited as a special envoy should wear such a thing was considered wholly unreasonable.

"The way I heard it, whether I wear this collar might change the whole course of relations between our countries."

"…It truly pains me that you were forced to cede your freedom in this way," Julius said. "And I applaud your decision."

"Act as solemn as *mew* want," Ferris broke in. "It's still a *collar*." He shrugged dramatically. In the same breath, though, he continued, "But look at this. Two members of the Council of Elders and the Sword Saint… This couldn't secretly be some plot by the empire to undermine Lugunica, could it? Do they want to assassinate Reinhard or something?"

"But that would unquestionably mean war, and the Dragon would not stand idly by… Or so I would like to think, but at the moment, I'm not so

sure."

"Yeah. We can't count on the Holy Dragon. Only thing we can rely on is our own strength! So listen up, Reinhard: Make sure you take down the whole empire before they get you. All by yourself."

"*Defense* is a knight's watchword, Ferris. If they attack first, that's one thing, but I can't go around slicing things up over a vague sense of unease." Reinhard flashed a thin smile.

"Y'know, the scary thing is that you didn't say you *couldn't* destroy them…" Ferris hugged his narrow shoulders and shivered. Julius listened to the conversation and braced himself for another scolding from Bordeaux.

"Knights of the Royal Guard should—"

But the old man was interrupted by a chuckling Miklotov. "Mm, going to reprimand them, are you? Back when you were a knight yourself, I remember you being even more daring."

Bordeaux adopted a sour look and fell silent. He turned to gaze out the window, the approaching Crystal Palace reflected in his eyes. "The Sword Saint, 'The Finest,' and 'The Blue'… True enough, it reminds me of all the trouble we had back then."

But nobody heard what he mumbled to himself; his words were swept away with the quickly passing scenery.

4

The Empire of Volakia was a large nation situated on the southern tip of the world map. It was blessed with rich, fertile land and a mild climate. Temperatures varied little throughout the year, with nothing approaching what might be called a hot or a cold season. This ensured that the vast majority of the empire's people faced no threat of starvation, entrusting themselves to the state's care.

At the same time, though, such a bountiful environment bred boredom, and boredom paved the way to discontent. To avoid the spread of such lethargy, the Empire of Volakia had long admonished its people to be strong in spirit, a teaching deeply reflected in the nation's governance and policies.

In the empire, the strong stood over—often atop—the weak and were respected for it. The emperor himself was no exception. Indeed, the so-called Rite of Imperial Selection, by which the ruler of Volakia was chosen,

was the very pinnacle of this philosophy. The Volakian emperors took many wives from throughout the land, and they bore the rulers many children. These imperial offspring were then set against one another in a bloody contest for the throne, with the last survivor ascending to become the next emperor.

Destroy your brothers, lay low your sisters, and become ruler. It seemed akin to the ways of beasts, but this was how the imperial family led by example, and it was this unyielding doctrine that granted the emperors ironfisted control over the people.

Such was the way of this land, and such was the spirit necessary to build a strong empire…

"Raise your head. I grant permission." The voice had enough gravitas to send a shiver through the soul of any listener.

It was not a shudder of any emotion so easily classified as joy or pleasure, nor terror or repulsion. If Julius had to express it, he felt it was closest to what he had experienced when he was confronted by the two members of the Council of Elders in that dragon carriage. This, however, was on a completely different level.

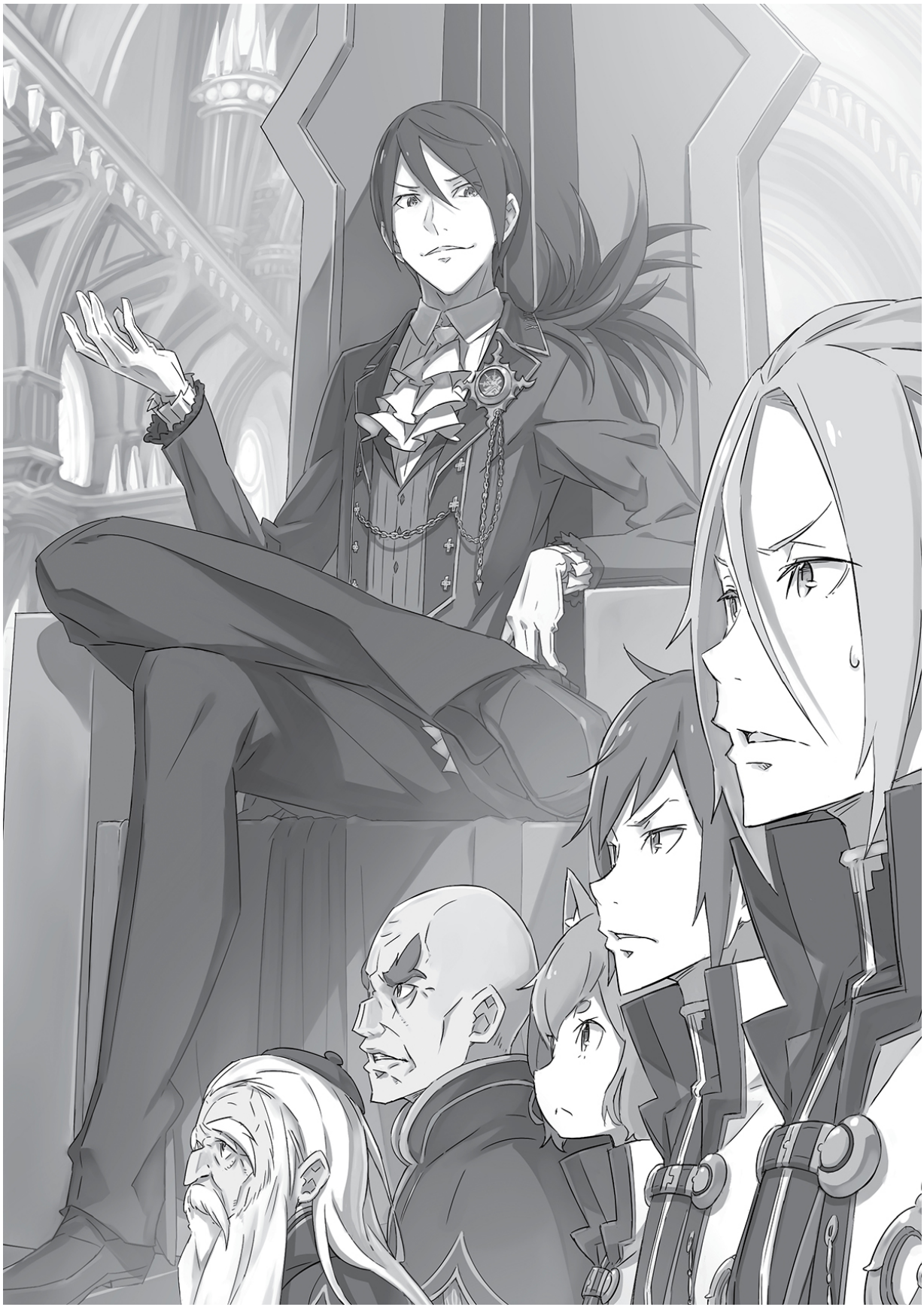
"——" Saying nothing, Julius slowly rose from the bow he had made as befit propriety. In front of him were the two elders, and beside him were his two fellow soldiers, also raising their heads. Julius took them in at a glance, then looked once more at the dais in front of him. In the throne located on the far end of a red carpet sat a man who exuded incomparable majesty. Julius could hardly breathe.

The man on the throne was handsome and young, with black hair and almond-shaped eyes. Likely in his midtwenties, he had pale skin, and his slim frame was clad in an outfit that was mostly red and black. He seemed to eschew ostentation given the distinct lack of jewelry and accessories. Although his elegant form was quite striking, there was little else to physically distinguish him at a glance.

Except, perhaps, for the overwhelming force that emanated from his gaze and his posture.

In this world, there was no shortage of people who commanded the loyalty of those around them through sheer presence. Many of them achieved

great success, obtaining positions befitting their tremendous resources or keen wits—but the young man before Julius's eyes was a rare jewel even among gemstones, a creature polished to perfection…



That was the nature of the seventy-seventh emperor of Volakia, Vincent Volakia. Julius and the other delegates from the kingdom had been ushered into the audience chamber of the Crystal Palace of Lupghana, where they knelt before the emperor and offered obeisance, as was proper etiquette for an imperial audience.

The throne was, like the palace itself, fashioned from gorgeous magic stone. Behind it stood a banner with Volakia's national crest: a wolf pierced by a sword. Armored soldiers lined the room on either side, maintaining absolute silence. Every last one exuded an almost palpable martial valor. They made Julius both nervous and vigilant, and he naturally took extra care not to do anything that might be considered inappropriate in this place.

Emperor Vincent, though, paid Julius no mind. Instead, he winked and said, "Miklotov, you've aged so much since I saw you last." His expression never shifted as he offered a jabbing remark in place of a proper greeting.

"Hmm," Miklotov said with a familiar sigh. "But you, Your Majesty, look ever more radiant. It makes it all too clear to me how much these old bones have wasted away… You see, even the color is gone from my hair."

"An old tree never had so shrewd a tongue. It's been seven years now since I assumed the throne, but I've never seen a single hint of color in your hair since the day we first met."

"Oh, you haven't? Hmm. A slip of my memory, then. You know what age does to a man. Perhaps I ought to start making preparations to really retire." Miklotov patted his white beard as he gently deflected the emperor's comment.

"Hah." Vincent chuckled, knowing Miklotov intended to do no such thing. "If you were to withdraw from public service, it would surely be a bitter blow to Lugunica. Though, we in the empire might welcome such a development. Ah, but enough of feeling each other out. Lay your heart before me, Miklotov."

"A rather intimidating command from Your Majesty."

"Poorly advised wordplay will do you little good here. Be careful that a slip of the tongue does not sully your reputation in your twilight years."

The conversation was jocular, familiar, yet it held the tension of a sword duel, with Miklotov probing with a mild joke and Vincent replying with a sharp riposte. The atmosphere in the room seemed to freeze with this back-and-forth between two men who were pillars of their respective nations. But

at this moment of apparent stalemate, the other elder among the envoys took it upon himself to enter the fray—and with a unique method.

"This princeling is even more uncouth than I'd heard. I guess I'd expect no less than perfect arrogance from the emperor of Volakia."

Namely, he chose to criticize the emperor, quietly, but to his face.

The speaker was Bordeaux, kneeling next to the venerable Miklotov, his huge bulk somewhat hidden by his bent posture. His remark—indeed, his provocation—sent a shock wave through the audience chamber. The imperial soldiers could hardly be expected to show mercy when responding to slander of their liege. They lurched from their resting positions, straight swords pressed against Bordeaux's thick neck.

It was an explosive gambit on his part, but if he erred his next move, the audience chamber would run with blood…

"What's this? I figured you'd slice me up without a second thought—never thought you Imperials to be so compassionate." Bordeaux simply looked around at the panoply of bare steel, huffed, and stood. The men around him had the honed builds of trained soldiers. Even so, Bordeaux towered over them. The imperial soldier closest to the old man suddenly realized his quarry was gazing down at him and trembled slightly at the power Bordeaux radiated; the tip of his sword shook. An instant later, the terrified soldier forced his arm to stay still, forced the sword not to shake.

"That's enough. Remember whom you all stand before."

Mere breaths away from all hell unleashing, the emperor interceded. The soldiers' battle lust instantly vanished, and after a moment of hesitation, they sheathed their swords. If the emperor had waited another few seconds, Bordeaux might have been cut down.

That fact, however, didn't seem to concern him in the least. "Very kind of you, Your Majesty. Did your Stargazers tell you to be especially nice to the envoys?"

"Our Stargazers are indeed farsighted, but we do not wish to become a puppet dancing on their strings. And we would not bother consulting them about *your* fate."

"Oh-ho?"

"Who would be so foolish as to lose their temper because of the yapping of one ill-trained dog. Or perhaps it has less to do with a lack of training than a lack of intelligence? If so, all the more reason to pity him."

“How dare you…” Bordeaux was infuriated when his taunt was seen and raised by an even greater one. He was obviously spoiling for a fight, and the imperial soldiers in the room began to perk up once again.

But it would not do to let the situation devolve into physical violence.

“That exchange just now was from *The Guillotine of Magrizza*. A conversation between an elder of great intellect and a father-king…”

“What?” Bordeaux asked, befuddled by the unexpected murmur that forestalled his rage.

Vincent, however, responded with a “hmm,” his interest piqued by someone who had previously been all but invisible to his upswept eyes. It was Julius who now bore the weight of the emperor’s gaze. “It seems there are a few somewhat knowledgeable men mixed in with this pack of uneducated mongrels.”

“Please accept my profound apologies for my disrespect, Your Majesty. It is the height of presumption for me to encroach upon the conversation of an emperor.”

“Forgiven. You see, we are merciful to all but the most despicable. Even to the dogs…and dog*like*…among you.” Vincent managed to indulge Julius’s interruption and toss another barb at Bordeaux in the same breath. It seemed then that even Bordeaux realized that the earlier back-and-forth was a literary reference to an old text rather than a simple verbal sparring match.

Directing a sour expression not just at Vincent, but also at Miklotov, Bordeaux said, “Master Miklotov, I can see I’ve embarrassed myself without cause.”

“Mmm. And it’s agonizing for you, I’ve no doubt… But don’t strain yourself too much. Both you and I cannot afford to behave like we did oh so long ago.”

“I could still crush that twig with one hand.”

Bordeaux’s blood was boiling, and Miklotov could only smile wistfully. Then Bordeaux pointedly stopped smiling, put his palm and fist together in front of his chest, and bowed to Vincent. “I have offended Your Majesty. I apologize for my disrespect and my lack of study.”

“In that case, I suppose I must withdraw our comments about your resemblance to a canine, Councilor ‘Mad Dog’ Zergev.” The so-called Mad Dog looked less than amused to hear that name, but he dutifully went back to his place. His evident displeasure was no doubt a combination of suddenly

being addressed by that old nickname and the fact that his real nature had been so thoroughly revealed. And perhaps also some frustration with himself that he hadn't realized sooner that the emperor calling him a dog was, in part, surely a play on that old title.

Nonetheless…

"Well, now that these various misunderstandings have been cleared up and all glib words mended, perhaps I may be so bold as to raise the matter that has brought us here on this occasion."

Bordeaux had come off the worst in the skirmish that just ended, but the whole episode had actually helped ease the tension in the audience chamber. Miklotov stepped neatly into the opening, seizing the initiative in the conversation. Vincent winked at the old man's suggestion, generously lowering his head slightly. The man's exact mood proved difficult to discern. "Very well. Time is finite; it is more valuable than gold. And ours is worth more than most."

"We are grateful, Your Majesty. The reason for our visit may be simply stated: We come in hopes of concluding a nonaggression pact between our kingdom and your empire."

"_____"

There was a sort of voiceless gasp. As he revealed his true intent, the impression Miklotov gave changed entirely. His grandfatherly warmth vanished, and what burned brightest now in the old sage's eyes was a cold intelligence. Even Julius and the others, who had known what was coming, instinctively held their breaths at the sudden change in attitude. The words Miklotov spoke and the brutally direct nature of his request were no less shocking. Likewise, the attendant troops were obviously disconcerted.

Only a few people in the room showed no special reaction to the suggestion: Miklotov himself, Bordeaux, who was standing next to him—and sitting across from them, the very target of this blow, Vincent.

"____" The emperor was silent, peering down at the sage who looked up at him. The ruler's dark eyes had such power that it seemed they could set anything on fire with a mere glance. But the elder endured this gaze resolutely, utterly still even as it scorched him. Just when it seemed the silence between them could grow no deeper—

"Beginning with Randohal Lugunica, every member of the royal family has been felled by illness," the emperor announced. "The Dragonfriend

Kingdom has been shaken to its very core, perhaps fatally so."

"Who can say for sure?"

"Don't try to hide it; there's no point. When a rumor begins to spread in the city, you may as well whisper it directly into our ear. Do not expect us to sit here and entertain your game of riddles."

The death of the king, and the end of the royal bloodline, had never been publicly disclosed. However, mouths could never be barred like doors. Rumors of the king's failing health had long since pervaded the capital of Lugunica, and it had only been a matter of time until it became public knowledge that the ruler had succumbed to disease. It was impossible that the Volakian Empire, which watched every move of the Lugunica Royal Family, would be unaware of this development.

"This is unlike you, the one everyone calls a sage. Caught flat-footed and a step behind. Once it becomes common knowledge that your royal family is in dire straits, the value of your nation's diplomatic missions drops precipitously. Indeed, they are very nearly worthless."

"_____" "Tell me, with the royal bloodline extinguished, what becomes of your contract with the Holy Dragon? We should think that would be of utmost concern to you above all. Without its backing, none of your nation's royals are anything more than doting fools."

There was no malice in the emperor's words. He simply laid out the reality of the Lugunican ruling family. At least some of what he said was fact —and a widely recognized political opinion. The royalty of Lugunica had been too good-hearted to stand over other people. Their virtue was unsuited to their station, and behind their backs, many even said they lacked political acumen entirely. Still, it was this same, basic decency that earned them the respect of the common people.

Julius himself was perfectly well aware of these facts. He'd had the privilege, however brief, of being close to one member of the royal family before the young man died. It inspired in Julius a sort of mild panic. For another, who had been much closer to that prince, was right beside him…

"You there, the beast-boy. If you have something to say, say it with your mouth, not with your eyes."

"——" Julius couldn't speak; his fears came true as the emperor's gaze fell upon the kneeling Ferris. The boy was usually so easygoing, but the look he now leveled at Vincent roiled with emotion. Vincent's words had clearly angered him. Spitting upon the memory of the departed royals was one of the very few things that could incense Ferris.

Still kneeling, Ferris took the ruler at his word and spoke up. "Then with all due respect, I shall say my piece, Your Majesty. Be they dead or alive, I cannot remain silent when the royal family is slandered, even if it is the word of an emperor. We are a special envoy from the Kingdom of Lugunica, and I am a member of the royal guard." His careful choice of words kept him within the bounds of propriety, but his simmering anger was laid bare. Vincent acknowledged Ferris's hostility without so much as a change of expression.

Public officials are different. Such seemed to be the message, and Ferris furrowed his brows deeper. "Think what you will, Your Majesty. But each and every member of the royal family was an upstanding person, worthy of loyalty. I myself served the prince with a glad heart…"

Vincent quietly cut Ferris off, drumming his fingers on the arm of his throne. "Bravery, loyalty, fidelity… No one cherishes these intangible merits so much as those with no other evident talents. They say loyalty can even inspire one to lay down their own life. However…" He turned his dark eyes on the row of imperial soldiers. And then…

"You, the footman there. Yes, you."

"Sir!"

The emperor had indicated one of the soldiers who had earlier drawn his sword on Bordeaux. The man stepped forward and bowed deeply. Before he could rise again, the emperor said, "Take that sword of yours and chop off your own head."

"Huh…?" A sound of sheer surprise came from Ferris. But Vincent ignored him, rapping on the armrest again.

"I am compassionate; I shall repeat myself. *Take your sword and chop off your own head.* Can't you do that?"

"S-sir!" The man's throat trembled at the emperor's mad command. Hardly a second later, he had knelt in place and removed his helmet. He appeared to be a strapping lad still in his twenties. Gritting his teeth, he drew the sword at his hip and placed it against his own neck. His muscles tensed

—

"I'm afraid I can't stand by and watch this."

The instant before the young man's head went rolling on the ground, someone stopped him. It was Reinhard, who had moved so quickly that he had been all but invisible. Surely, he had been kneeling just a moment before, but the red-haired man had traveled several feet in the space of a breath, intercepting the young man's sword. Had anyone seen the swift movement?

After witnessing the Sword Saint's spectacular display, Vincent stopped drumming his fingers. "Hmm. We had heard the rumors, but… Hmph, well, rumors cannot always be trusted. We have sorely misjudged you."

"You must forgive me for being so forward… And for not meeting Your Majesty's expectations."

"Quite the opposite. You wildly exceed them."

Reinhard bowed at this word of praise from the emperor, then let go of the sword that had been poised for suicide. The soldier slumped to his knees in relief, and Reinhard returned to his place before the throne with a nod at Ferris. The young demi-human, struck dumb by these rapid developments, finally came to his senses. Vincent rested his chin on his hands as he watched this all play out.

"It is as you see, beast-child. Do not parade loyalty before us as if it were of any great worth. Obedience is simply the side effect of a ruler who is firmly in control. He who clings to loyalty is all the more fool for it."

"——!" Ferris could hardly speak.

"And you, the soldier: You may step back. We have had quite enough sport for now. I confess, I do not see the pleasure in tormenting half-bloods."

Ferris's heritage was more than clear from his cat ears and his body. He felt humiliated but was too smart to argue with Vincent any further. He bowed even though he desperately wanted to do anything but and knelt once more. Such was the pride of Ferris, a healer capable of saving life itself. It seemed the emperor had discerned even that in the course of a single exchange.

"What an amusing bunch this is," Vincent said. "I had been told I was to be visited by a party of envoys from the kingdom, but perhaps they've sent us a troupe of entertainers by mistake?"

"If Your Majesty is so inclined, we would not balk at offering some measure of amusement."

"However generous my heart, I am not one to enjoy the spectacle of an

old tree shaking off its leaves. Your request has been heard. Judgment will be rendered at a later time. Withdraw." With a wave of his hand, Emperor Vincent motioned for Miklotov and the others to leave the audience chamber.

It had all been diversions and detours; they had hardly spoken about the crucial topic. That, at least, was how Julius felt, but Miklotov nodded obediently and bowed deeply once more. "We appreciate you giving us so much of your precious time and shall await your judgment." He seemed perfectly accustomed to the emperor's arrogance and prepared to politely retire. The others were disappointed but took their cue from the elder. They were just about to follow the soldier guiding them out of the audience chamber when—

"Oh yes, that's right." A word from Vincent, barely a whisper, stopped them. Julius and the others halted with the door of the audience chamber practically in front of them. Then all five turned as the voice continued, "We have said we do not speak three times. Yes?" The emperor looked very nearly bored atop his throne.

An unpleasant sound followed.

"Hrggh…ghh…"

A saber was stained with blood as the steel buried itself halfway into the exposed neck.

The young man with the sword from before groaned, coughing blood, then collapsed where he stood. The act was performed with cruel courtesy. He had first stepped away from his post so he would not dirty the red carpet. The wound was fatal.

"Wh-why?!"

It had seemed the young man had managed to escape with his life, yet now he chose to throw it away. Ferris swallowed after fully realizing what had just happened and tried to rush over to the fallen boy. But the other imperial soldiers drew their swords and barred his way.

"Wha—?"

"This is what it means to have control in Volakia. You had best not forget it." After being turned away by bare steel, the emperor's brutal words were directed at the speechless Ferris's back. The reality weighed on his heart and made his chest tighten, and Julius felt the same.

The philosophies of Volakia and Lugunica would never see eye to eye. The gulf dividing their two nations had become disturbingly clear, reflected

in the blood spreading slowly across the floor.

5

"…I still could have saved him!"

They had left the audience chamber and were somewhere in the halls of the Crystal Palace. Ferris was whispering to himself, his face dark and downcast.

"Ferris…"

"If they hadn't stopped me, I could have saved him… It just doesn't make any sense."

His slim shoulders were shaking, his voice thick with frustration. The depth of his shame was unmistakable, and Julius discovered he could find no words to offer. Ferris was speaking out of his pride as a healer, as one who supported life. Any attempt at comfort that Julius might've made would have seemed glib in the face of that. He was still searching for something to say when—

"I'm sure it must've been quite a surprise for visitors from abroad."

He was taken aback by the interjection of their guide, who glanced over at them.

"——" For a moment, Julius said nothing, content to mull over the words of the imperial soldier who'd spoken to them. He had encountered more than a few of this country's troops since crossing the border, and none of them were like their guide. Maybe it came down to the warlike character that radiated from most of the empire's soldiers, but curiously didn't from the man in front of them.

This difference in disposition seemed to also be reflected in the man's unique appearance. Volakian troops were usually covered from head to toe in iron and steel equipment, as if to boldly announce they were powerful soldiers. This man was conspicuous for his exposed and visible face. He was tall, with his gray-brown hair brushed back behind his head. His drooping eyes and gentle smile projected an inviting friendliness, but the way he carried himself made him seem every bit as dangerous as the tip of a spear, like something that demanded caution.

His equipment might have been different from the other imperial troops, but it was clear he was not someone to be trifled with any more than the other

soldiers. In fact, it was apparent that he was permitted distinctive gear specifically because he was recognized as a cut above the rest.

Julius studied all this, then began his answer: "Yes, that's true enough. I would be lying if I claimed otherwise. To elaborate on what my friend is feeling, I wouldn't wish to think this is what passes for a greeting in the empire."

"A greeting? Not exactly, but you're not that far off either… Anyhow, I don't blame you for being appalled. Maybe it was all a bit too exciting for foreigners."

"It's not an issue of how exciting it was…," Ferris muttered into the middle of the conversation. Julius decided to let his remark pass, choosing to continue to talk with the soldier. The calm, almost lighthearted response had given him some insight into who this man was.

"I believe here in Volakia, you would be a general, would you not?" Julius said.

"Ah, you're well-informed. Yes, a common foot soldier is promoted to a private first-class. Above that, you achieve the rank of general third-class, then general second-class, and finally, general first-class—that's the custom. When you reach the rank of general, you finally get free of that suffocating armor."

"I'm told those in the first class represent the finest the empire has to offer, and that there are nine of them in total—the so-called Nine Divine Generals."

Citizens of the empire, be strong. That was the only and most important teaching in Volakia. It made bloodline and birthright of minimal importance, meaning everyone was judged on the basis of their individual strength. As a pure, unadulterated meritocracy, the Volakian Empire valued power above all else.

These Nine Divine Generals held a rank roughly equivalent to the captains of the knightly orders in Lugunica. And if Julius's judgment was not mistaken, the man before them was one of them…

"Seems it's not worth pretending, so I'll confess—I am one of those nine. Balleroy Temeglyph, pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"…So our minder comes straight from the Nine Generals. The empire sure knows how to be hospitable." When Bordeaux heard that one of the most powerful fighters in Volakia was their personal guide, deep creases formed

on his brow.

Balleroy, unperturbed, tapped his own forehead and replied, “Goodness gracious. Not much to be said if you put it that way. It only goes to show how much the emperor values our dear guests.”

Ferris, finally unable to endure any longer, cut in, “You people sure have a strange sense of what it means to value someone.” From the humiliation of the plague-ravaged Lugunica Royal Family to the needless suicide, everything that had happened in the audience chamber had seemed designed to needle at the demi-human’s nerves. It was no wonder he couldn’t accept this as some show of consideration on the empire’s part.

“Like I said earlier…” Balleroy, sensing the charge in the air, winked and cracked the bones of his neck. “It might be a little too exciting for visitors, but fer us, it’s just a day’s work. Seems to ’ve sat especially badly with your pretty friend there.”

“A day’s work? Are you insane?”

“Ferris.”

“Aw, don’t worry about it. Think that reaction’s plenty natural, it is.”

Julius tried to rein in Ferris’s overly direct response. Balleroy, once again, seemed unfazed. He pointed to the Volakian crest emblazoned on the back of his light armor. “The pierced wolf, his eyes say he ain’t dead. That’s how things go in Volakia. Might be down to your last breath, but ya don’t use it to beg for your life.”

“And you’re implying this attitude has something to do with the display in the throne room?”

“’Tis simple. That soldier who killed himself was never going to leave that room alive. He pulled a sword on Councilor Zergev, but you could see he was scared about it. That’s the moment he died.”

Julius and the others were struck dumb to hear Balleroy speak so nonchalantly of life and death. Seemingly oblivious to the envoys’ reaction, the general led the way with a sprightly step.

“The boy showed fear in front of all those people, and that meant we never were gonna be able to use him again. If he couldn’t’ve killed himself, the others wouldn’t have stood by and done nothing. Cowardice is a disease, and it only needs one weakling to spread. Then there’s the question of what would’ve happened to his family if he disobeyed an order from the emperor.”

“They wouldn’t seriously use his family as leverage, would they? That’s

despicable…"

"Cowardice spreads like wildfire. The people of the empire don't need soldiers afraid of their own shadows. Look, though, I see how 'tis. Just something we don't see eye to eye on; won't ask you to understand."

"Then you're in luck. Because I absolutely don't," Ferris replied firmly, his distaste for the empire hardening all the while.

"Splendid," Balleroy replied, and he laughed merrily. "Whoops, here we are at your quarters, honored guests." They had spent so long speaking that they had arrived at their rooms, and the general's time as their guide was over.

The guest chambers at the Crystal Palace, like the rest of the building, seemed to be the final word in elegance. From the furnishing to the lamps, everything that populated the room was of the highest quality. Julius marveled at the quarters, which had apparently been designed by people who were unacquainted with the word *simplicity*.

"Fancy this," said Balleroy, still standing in the doorway. "I finally meet the famous Sword Saint, and he hardly says a word."

"…My apologies. I just wanted to minimize the chances of saying anything that could be considered rude."

"Well, how's that for modesty. But why so?"

"When I do anything, it often seems to put people needlessly on guard." This was why Reinhard had been keeping his peace until Balleroy made this unexpected comment to him.

Balleroy widened his eyes slightly at Reinhard's answer, but he was soon chuckling somewhere deep in his throat.

"Master Balleroy…?"

"Ah heavens, pardon me. Modesty, I called it, but I think I'll be takin' that back. Master Sword Saint understands his own strength, I see."

"You give me too much credit. And that title, Sword Saint—it sits so heavily on me."

"So you say, but ya ain't denying you're the strongest." Balleroy snapped his fingers. "Right?"

The red-haired man smiled wanly but didn't answer. His silence was affirmation enough.

Reinhard van Astrea was, without question, the most powerful being in the world. He fully acknowledged his own strength. But that was not the

embodiment of Reinhard's own ideals. He was not yet satisfied with himself. That was what motivated him to push beyond his grand title.

"Well, bless me… Doesn't matter the country; the strongest always just go their own way."

"Someone else you have in mind, Master Balleroy?"

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. Our number one's the same way, that's all." He did seem to be considering something more, for a complicated emotion appeared in Balleroy's eyes. Though, perhaps only Julius noticed the welter of feelings in his expression. Maybe because he himself was familiar with it. "'Fraid he's away from the city on business right now, but maybe you'll get a chance to talk to him sometime. Could be interesting. Might be surprised how well you understand each other."

"I hope to have the chance one day." The discussion between Balleroy and Reinhard drew to a close before Julius had a chance to give any voice to his misgivings.

Balleroy, his job done and his curiosity satisfied, said, "Right then, much as I hate to bore our esteemed visitors, I'll have to ask you to wait here for the time being. When His Majesty makes up his mind, you'll be summoned. Don't know if it'll be to the throne room or to a temporary residence, though."

"I simply hope it isn't to a stone prison or to the exposed earth."

"Ha-ha-ha. I'll make sure to let His Majesty know."

Julius had spoken mostly in jest, and Balleroy received his comment with a laugh and departed. When he disappeared, the envoys from Lugunica were at last left to themselves. Julius felt the tension drain out of his shoulders just as it did from the air around him.

"So Master Miklotov. How do you think our negotiations went?" Bordeaux, free from the eyes of their minder, made himself comfortable on the sofa as he started the discussion. He gestured to a chair in front of him, and Miklotov sat. "I've never spoken to the emperor before, so I couldn't tell. Can't say he seemed very convinced. And he didn't look like he was sold on the idea of a nonaggression pact."

"Mmm. Nonetheless, you played your part well, Master Bordeaux. I'm rather more disappointed by my own maneuvering—or the failure thereof. I hope we haven't unduly annoyed His Majesty, but…in that respect, our youths have acquitted themselves well."

“Us, sir?” Julius raised an eyebrow in surprise as the knowing gaze of the head sage fell upon him. The very least Julius could say was that he didn’t feel he had contributed anything to the negotiations. That said, it was hard to judge; he, like Bordeaux, found Vincent’s reactions difficult to read.

One of them, however, interpreted Miklotov’s praise as apparent sarcasm. It was Ferris. His ears were pressed back against his head, and he nodded toward Miklotov with a dark expression. “I’m very sorry, sir. I let my passion cloud my sense of duty… I wasted our time in the throne room.”

Miklotov shook his head. “Nothing of the sort. No one would blame you for what you did. In fact, I myself was deeply heartened to hear you defend the royal family.”

Julius felt the same. Most surprising of all, Bordeaux crossed his arms and nodded soberly. “A man can’t be called loyal if he would let a slight to his king or his prince go unchallenged. You spoke for all of us. Got nothing to be ashamed of, kid.”

“In fact, Emperor Vincent might have been far more perturbed if we *hadn’t* argued with him. From that perspective, I don’t think there’s any cause to believe your actions have harmed our diplomatic position.”

“If… If you say so…” Surprised to find himself forgiven for his emotional outburst, Ferris seemed at a loss.

Then Miklotov turned to Julius and Reinhard. “Nor was there any problem with the way the two of you spoke and acted. The fine upbringing of our Sir Julius and the prowess of our Sir Reinhard seem to have impressed the emperor.”

“Huh. Huh! Sounds like we’re doing great then, negotiation-wise.”

“I’m afraid my withered eyes are no longer sharp enough to see the consequences of *your* actions, Master Bordeaux…” Miklotov looked dourly at his colleague, who appeared to have forgotten his own tense exchange with Vincent. The huge elder pretended not to notice as he looked around the room.

“Gotta say, I can’t seem to relax in here. We might not have one of the generals looking right at us anymore, but there’s so much mana hopping around here that it makes me feel sick.”

“Yes… The stones used to build the Crystal Palace include a number of magic crystals, exceptionally rare even among magic stones. They’ve been carved and sculpted by the world’s most capable technicians. The density of

mana floating through this castle is exceptionally high. We must take care not to get inebriated."

"I think meowby they're doing it on purpose."

Magic stones and magic crystals were both major mana receptacles. The castle had been carefully constructed from a wide variety of large and small magic stones, and an unimaginable amount of mana swirled within the structure. At such a density, it would be impossible to use magic in the normal manner; in fact, in some cases, the excessive mana supply could potentially cause a caster to explode.

"Meaning that one would have to be accustomed to this environment in order to use magic at anything resembling their normal power," Julius mused. "That point alone shows just how thorough the Crystal Palace's defenses are."

"And *that* means a bunch of emissaries from another country are on completely uneven footing compared to the imperial troops, who are all used to this amount of mana … Why do you look so happy?"

"…Do I look happy?"

"Downright thrilled!"

Julius had been contemplating the construction of the Crystal Palace out of academic curiosity, which seemed to upset Ferris. The cat-boy looked away, disheartened, and Julius turned to Reinhard instead. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Me? I'm not sure… That spirit of inquiry is one of the things I like about you, Julius. And your analysis just now seemed thorough and thoughtful…"

"Not the point! Forget about Julius!" Ferris burst out.

"I was only kidding," Reinhard said with a wink. To Julius himself, *Forget about Julius* seemed a rather heartless turn of phrase, but he accepted it as a sign of Ferris's intimacy and said nothing more. Reinhard, meanwhile, gazed around the room with his blue eyes as if to take in the entire castle. "All the mana in here doesn't bother me too much, honestly. I've never been much for magic, and the density of mana doesn't do me any harm to speak of one way or the other."

"Oh, that's right. You seem like you can do anything, Reinhard, so I'm always really surprised to remeowmber you can't use magic."

"Anything, heh!" Reinhard forced a smile. "Sometimes, it feels like there's nothing I can do." Those last words sounded a touch harsh. They

showed that Reinhard was in no way taking their situation lightly, and Julius found himself privately admiring the man for that.

"Plus," Reinhard added, his fingers brushing the metal choker at his neck, "right now, my powers are suppressed anyway. I already couldn't use magic before—now I feel truly useless."

"Hmm, I guess I get it. Your whole self-worth is directly related to your strength, isn't it?"

"Ferris, I think you're going too far—"

"It was a joke, just a joke!"

Julius, finally feeling Ferris had crossed a line, leveled an intimidating gaze at him, but Ferris slapped his hands over his head. If nothing else, it suggested he had finally begun to let go of what had happened in the audience chamber. Relieved to see it, Julius decided to forgo a proper scolding. He looked at Reinhard, who was no more genuinely upset about Ferris's jab than he was, but—

"Mm? Reinhard, what are you looking at?"

"Eh, just the town. You can get a sense of the capital from here."

"I see; you're taking the lay of the land." Julius joined Reinhard in looking out the window.

The guest chambers were on a high floor of the Crystal Palace, and from their vantage point, they could see almost half the capital city. Unlike the capital of Lugunica, which spread out in a circle with the castle at its center, Lupghana was ensconced by walls, which formed a square around the city. And unlike the kingdom's capital, where the rich and the poor were clearly separated, the appointments of the citizens of the empire seemed to vary little from one part of the city to another. Its development seemed quite distinct from Lugunica, where the nobility and downtrodden commoners lived in contrasting realms of light and shadow.

"Quite a different-looking place from our home," Julius said.

"Yeah… The land and the weather have something to do with it, but mostly, I think it comes from the ethos that the emperor promotes. Sometimes, competition among people really can lead to prosperity," Reinhard answered.

"Reinhard," Julius interjected. "Do you think it's right?"

"Some of it. But I can't abide abandoning of the weak," the Sword Saint responded firmly. It was his one and only response to the imperial way of

life…

"I agree. I pray you'll always remember that."

…and it was that ideal that made Julius proud to call Reinhard, the Sword Saint, his friend.

6

"____"

It had been hours since they had been ushered from the throne room into the guest chamber. A long wait, but being ready for anything was part of a knight's duty. No man in his position would even entertain the idea of falling asleep from boredom, and Julius had become a master at imagining a shatranj board—the pawns, like soldiers, lined up as if on a battlefield—and playing a game in his mind. It meant he didn't think of the waiting time as wasted, but…

"Things seem just a little *too* quiet here."

It was well and good to play an imaginary game of shatranj, but the faces of the others gave clues to what was in their own minds. Reinhard and Miklotov, like Julius, seemed not to begrudge the wait. Surprisingly, even Bordeaux appeared content to be passing the time in quiet meditation on the sofa.

The problem was Ferris, who was visibly agitated and unable to endure the silence. "What are they *mewing*? Are they doing this just to tormeownt us?! We've been sitting here for *ages*!"

"Ferris, that's enough. I sympathize, but we're in the royal palace of another nation. Your behavior here will reflect directly on our kingdom. In all things—"

"Easy for *mew* to say! If Ferri's jabbering was such a problem, they would've burst in ages ago!"

"Hmm…"

"But instead, they leave us here! Do you think His Meowjesty has completely forgotten about us?"

That was hardly likely, but Ferris's pessimistic outburst got Julius thinking. The point of this special mission had been to propose a nonaggression pact to the empire. The empire, wishing to bargain from a

place of strength, wouldn't hesitate to do anything that would improve their position, including psychological warfare. From that perspective, the protracted delay and the refusal to acknowledge Ferris might have been deliberate stratagems.

Whatever the case, if things didn't develop soon…

But just as he was starting to worry, a knock came at the door. "I request a moment with the Lugunican special envoys."

"Mrow!" When the longed-for action finally arrived, Ferris looked at Julius with wide eyes. Julius nodded at him, then faced the door and invited the caller in.

A soldier in full armor appeared. "My apologies for interrupting you," he said as he bowed, though it seemed he couldn't have known whether or what he was interrupting.

"It's no trouble at all. Have you come with a summons?"

"Yes sir. But if you'll forgive me, sir, I've only been instructed to summon one person."

"Just one, you say?"

"Yes sir. I was told to return with the Sword Saint, Master Reinhard."

A faint look of surprise crossed Julius's face. He wasn't the only one; everyone in the room was startled, including the summonee himself. Reinhard cocked his head, perplexed. "Emperor Vincent asked for me by name?"

"Yes sir. His Majesty wishes to speak with you. May I request that you come with me?"

"I'm willing, but…" Reinhard cast a quick, hesitant glance at Miklotov. This was a summons from the emperor himself; they couldn't very well risk angering him by refusing. But the spokesman for their mission was, in the end, Miklotov. Reinhard wouldn't answer without his leave.

The elder nodded quietly at the Sword Saint. "Having you accompany us has been a condition of these negotiations from the beginning. Go see His Majesty and do your best to be polite."

"I understand. All right, lead the way." With Miklotov's blessing, Reinhard was ready to go back to the emperor. As he made to follow the armored guard out, though, the red-haired man spared a glance at Julius. His meaning was clear enough: With Reinhard away, the only knights left in the room would be Julius and Ferris. And Ferris barely counted when gauging strength in battle, so for practical purposes, Julius would be the sole guard.

Reinhard didn't expect Julius to do anything rash, but in a foreign country, one could never be too careful.

"I wonder what the emperor wants with Reinhard," Ferris said when the young man had left, staring at the door he had closed behind him.

"Fine question," Julius said with a shrug. "If he just wanted to talk, he could have done it in the throne room. But Emperor Vincent is deliberately separating Reinhard from us… Who can say what he wants?"

Julius and Reinhard were both Knights of the Royal Guard. But Reinhard had succeeded to the name of Sword Saint before he was ten years old, and it was well-known that, ever since then, he had received orders directly from the leaders of the kingdom, fulfilling many sundry roles—more than a few of which he couldn't talk about. To give a recent example…

"The Pleiades Watchtower in the Auguria Dunes."

"Ferris, I—"

"I know, I know. You were choosing your words carefully, Julius. Besides, Ferri would never imagine criticizing Reinhard for something like that." Ferris waved a hand and tried to sound nonchalant, but Julius could see clearly how hard he was straining to force a smile. Ferris was not as good at controlling his emotions as he thought he was. Perhaps his perfect physical control left him more vulnerable in the emotional realm.

"——." For a moment, Julius was silent. Ferris was referring to a certain mission Reinhard had been given. One so important, the result could have shaken the Kingdom of Lugunica down to its foundations: He had been ordered to seek out the Sage, famously said to be all-knowing, in hopes of finding some way to counteract the plague that was devastating the Lugunica Royal Family.

Four hundred years ago, the Witch of Jealousy had cast the world into terror and chaos. This all-knowing Sage had been one of the three heroes who had sealed that terrible creature away. The Sage still lived, residing at the Pleiades Watchtower in the Auguria Dunes, which was on the kingdom's extreme eastern edge. That old seer was the royal family's last hope—a hope that had been entrusted to Reinhard.

But he had failed in his mission.

"So the royal line died out, and we lost our guarantee that the covenant with the Holy Dragon would continue," Julius said. "And that's why we're here in the empire."

"Meowby Reinhard blames himself for that."

Julius paused. "'Maybe you judge yourself harshly as well, Ferris. Am I wrong?" He probed at the cat-boy, who pondered Reinhard's state of mind.

Julius's two close friends both suffered from their inability to save the royal family. Reinhard, because he had failed on his mission. And Ferris, because he was called The Blue and served as Lugunica's best healer—curing illnesses and mending wounds was his very pride. Both of them felt that the kingdom, the royal line, had died out because they hadn't been strong enough. Julius was reminded of what Marcus had said to him personally just before they left for the empire.

He had been summoned into the captain's quarters, alone, the day before their departure. There, he had been ordered to keep a close eye on Reinhard and Ferris.

"——" Julius was determined to not let his friends out of his sight during this trip, and not only because of Marcus's orders. That was what had brought on his question just now.

"Blame myself…? Sure, yeah, I do. I mean, just think about who Ferri *is*." Ferris almost worked his lips into a smile as he spoke into the silence. But it was a smile of self-mockery. He was obviously tormented by profoundly painful emotions. As the kingdom's premier healer and a friend of the deceased prince, the memories must have been difficult.

"Ferris, you must not blame yourself. It wasn't your fault."

"…Pretty familiar words, as comfort goes."

"Sorry. I wish I could say something less trite, but…" Ferris's touch of irony made Julius rue his own lack of insight. He wanted dearly to say something that would truly speak to Ferris's heart. But all he had been able to muster were the most tired words of comfort in the world.

And the moment didn't even give him a chance to make another attempt.

"Hmm?" Julius raised an eyebrow as Ferris's ears twitched. Both of them had noticed the change at the same time. They looked at each other.

"Julius…," the cat-boy started; Julius nodded affirmatively.

He slowly raised his right hand to reveal a light glowing softly in his palm. It was Ire, one of the six greater spirits Julius held a pact with. When they had been guided to their room, Julius had sent out this spirit to keep watch in the Crystal Palace. The spirit and the demi-human blood that coursed in Ferris's veins had both detected something.

"Looks like something's afoot in the palace."

"Sure does. I think things have gotten a little rowdy." Bordeaux, sensing the two knights' reactions, opened his eyes and came out of his meditation. The bald-pated elder looked to their leader. "Master Miklotov?"

"Mm. They say hearing is the first thing to go with age. What rowdiness do you speak of, may I ask?"

"It sounds sort of…confused? Like everyone is flailing around. And for this to start right when they took Reinhard away. I don't like this."

"I agree," Julius said. "I think the imperial troops outside are gone, too."

There should have been soldiers stationed outside the door to ensure the visitors didn't do anything unwelcome and that nothing was done to them. But Julius no longer sensed the guards standing nearby. The most natural thing was to assume they had gone toward the ruckus.

"…I have a bad feeling about this," Julius said after a brief pause. "I'll go see what's happening. Master Miklotov, Lord Bordeaux, please stay here. Ferris will—Hmm."

"You could look a *little* less disappointed! Eh, you couldn't pay me to be all *Just leave everything to ol' Ferri!*"

"True enough. But then…"

"It's all right." Considering what might be happening, it made Julius uneasy to leave Ferris alone as a bodyguard. But his hesitation was forestalled by a word from Bordeaux, who got slowly to his feet. He crossed his arms, still great, sturdy limbs despite his age, and regarded the two young knights from beneath his thick eyebrows.

"Go make sure it's safe outside," he said. "I'll look after Master Miklotov myself."

"I'm rather afraid I'm being treated like luggage… But with Master Bordeaux here, I certainly believe I have nothing to worry about. Both of you, go and have a look."

"But sir…"

"Stop worrying," Bordeaux insisted, the bravery almost palpable about him. "Make sure everything is all right—and quick."

With a salute, as much to that aura of warriorhood as anything else, Julius exchanged a silent look with Ferris, and then they left the room.

Out in the hallway, he discovered that, indeed, the guards were missing. No sooner had he registered this unusual fact than they discovered the source

of the noise: people running through the halls of the Crystal Palace.

"I knew it. It's like they've lost their heads. Think there's been an assassination attempt on the emperor or something?"

"Careful anyone should hear you and think you're being serious. Put away your jokes for the time being."

"Yeah, sure."

Notwithstanding Ferris's tasteless remark, the pair set off at a quick pace to find out what was going on. The idea of an assassination had been nothing but Ferris being glib, but the commotion did have an edge of panic. And not without reason…

"Julius! I smell blood!" Ferris's face was grim. There was no sign of him joking now, and Julius's apprehension was growing by the second.

At length, they came to the source of the commotion. It was a crowd of imperial soldiers, oozing bloodlust as they mobbed the entrance of a room.

"Do whatever you have to! Just get it open! Knock it down!"

The soldiers were shouting, confronted with a large and firmly shut door. It must have been barred from the inside; the soldiers slammed a massive ram against it to no discernible effect. Two, then three times they brought the ram to bear. Finally, with an immense crash, the towering iron door flew inward.

"There! We did it! Inside—!"

The soldiers working on the door gave a cheer, but suddenly, their voices died in their throats. The others around them did the same. They seemed to be dumbstruck by what they saw before them.

Julius and Ferris came up behind. The two peered beyond the guardsmen into the room and saw…

"Impossible…" Julius let out unconsciously.

The room beyond was destroyed, the cold floor slick with the blood of several men. Among them was a face Julius recognized as that of Balleroy Temeglyph. Balleroy, one of the Nine Divine Generals, the most powerful warriors in the entire empire, was collapsed in a pool of blood, motionless. Standing beside him was another figure, looking down at his victims…

“Reinhard…”

The red-haired Sword Saint was the only one in the bloodstained room without a scratch.

7

“…!”

When Julius took in the scene in the room, he knew instantly that this was going to be trouble. Balleroy, one of the military leaders of a country that prized physical prowess above all else, lay bleeding at Reinhard’s feet. Anyone would think the powerful swordsman from another nation had undoubtedly done the deed. Julius would have come to the same conclusion, if the person in question had been anyone but Reinhard. However, Julius believed that man was incapable of doing something so impulsive.

Something had to be wrong here.

“Ferris! Tend to Master Balleroy, now!”

“Right!”

They would figure things out later; Julius set Ferris to caring for the fallen Balleroy. As astonishing as the scene before them was, there were wounded, and Ferris didn’t hesitate. He bounded through the blood to examine the injuries of the people in the room. Even if the wounds were serious, so long as the people weren’t dead, Ferris could—

“What else do they intend to do to the generals?! Stop him!”

“Don’t move, filth!”

The soldiers stopped the cat-boy before he could approach the victims. Snapping out of their horror, they drew their swords and surrounded Julius and Ferris. Several of the guards piled into the room and leveled their blades at Reinhard.

One of the men knelt at Balleroy’s side, shaking his bloodstained shoulders. “General Balleroy, get up! General! Damn! You bastards…!” But there was no response. The imperial soldiers looked more ready than ever to kill their visitors. The room had become a powder keg.

“Julius…!” Ferris said, keenly aware of the gravity of the situation. But Julius, too, was having trouble knowing what to do next. Throw down his weapon and surrender? But given the murder in the men’s eyes, throwing away his weapon might be a very foolish move. He didn’t want this staring

contest to go on forever, but—

"My castle rings with the din of the unwashed. What is going on?"

"Hrgh?" Julius strained to catch the clear but totally unexpected voice. Ferris, whose ears were better than his, stood wide-eyed as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. The soldiers did the same. The voice was unmistakable; it could be no one else.

It was the emperor, Vincent Volakia, in the flesh.

"…!" There was a great, collective clack of heels as the soldiers opened a path for their ruler. The way had been formed by the automatic loyalty of the men, and the emperor walked leisurely down it. When he saw what was in the room, he arched the eyebrows on his cold, intelligent face.

The chamber full of blood—Balleroy and the other soldiers on the ground—and the emissary of Lugunica standing over them…

"…I see." He nodded as if all this made sense to him, and he fixed Reinhard with a penetrating gaze. Reinhard straightened and put his hand to his chest. And at last, he spoke:

"By your leave, Your Majesty. Allow me to explain…"

The shouting of a furious soldier cut him off. "Your Majesty! These men are insurgents who didn't even hesitate to strike down a general in the very halls of the Crystal Palace! This is a declaration of war by the Kingdom of Lugunica against our Volakian Empire!"

Circumstantial evidence certainly supported the allegation. The rage of the imperial guardsmen was easy to understand. But there was one thing that couldn't be overlooked. Namely, that if all this were true, Lugunica and Volakia would be at war. And that could not be allowed to happen.

It seemed unlikely that Vincent would be as quick to come to conclusions as his subjects, but the possibility couldn't be ruled out entirely. Not least because of the very real likelihood that he himself had engineered this situation. And if that was so—if this entire thing was a deliberate pretext for war—how much of it could be attributed to the people of the Empire of Volakia, and how much was the brainchild of Emperor Vincent himself?

"Insurgents, indeed. You're right—if things are as they appear, then these men must be insane. To perpetrate this act of barbarity under our very nose—if they did it in sound mind, then judgment is already rendered."

"Emperor Vincent…"

Against Julius's worst imaginings, the emperor exposed the unnaturalness

of the situation with an almost bored expression. If nothing else, it reassured the man that His Majesty didn't intend to make any rash arrests. With Miklotov and Bordeaux both absent, their actions here would prove particularly crucial in preventing open war. The emperor's attitude at least gave them the leeway to do that.

But then that thin ray of hope was betrayed.

"Your Majesty the Emperor!"

The harsh bellow came from Reinhard, who flew at Vincent. The Sword Saint grabbed the emperor's arm and, faster than the eye could see, leaped backward into the room. Everyone, including Julius and Ferris, was left in shock.

"___"

Reinhard held Vincent fast from behind. The emissary of the Kingdom of Lugunica had taken the emperor of Volakia hostage in his own castle; any hope of resolving this peacefully had vanished.

"Damn you, get away from the—" The furious demands of the imperial guards were cut short.

"'O thou sinful rebel! O vessel of wrath so foul that e'en the moon and stars hide their faces from thee! If thou so ardently desire this my life, then let thy sullied steel drink deep of my blood!'"

"…?!"

They had been interrupted by the emperor, whose declamation rang through the room. He seemed to be provoking his own captor; a wave of fear ran through the ranks of his men. But this was not the true intention of the emperor, and only one person present understood this: Julius.

"___" Julius did not speak, but the next instant, the ruler of Volakia's gaze fixed upon the young knight. The emperor had spoken quite peculiarly. It seemed to be a test of some kind.

"…!" Julius ground his teeth as the great burden of an emperor's expectations suddenly fell on him.

Vincent's words had come from the old text, *The Guillotine of Magrizza*, from an episode in which an old king deceived his own treacherous retainer by allowing himself to be captured by an assassin he himself had hired.

The emperor's aim, the rapidly changing situation, Reinhard's presence—there could be only one explanation. Julius hesitated for only the space of a breath, and then he decided. "Reinhard, out the window!"

"…" Reinhard didn't hesitate at all. While still keeping a grip on Vincent's left arm, he flung himself backward through the window, shattering it with his back as he went through. The soldiers attempted to follow him, but they never had a chance. Reinhard's move had diverted the swords that had been keeping Julius at bay. This was the moment.

"Alo! Ake!" Julius shouted. A green glow appeared in one of his upturned hands, while a yellow one appeared in the other. In the blink of an eye, the glows intensified, and a surge of mana slammed into the imperial troops. A great wind flung them back against the wall, and they quickly slumped to the floor, where unnatural piles of earth secured them to the ground. The guards could cry out but couldn't move.

Julius didn't give them another thought. "Ferris!"

"Huh? Wha—? Wah! Ack, waaaait!"

Ferris, who had been far too shocked by the dizzying series of events to move, found Julius grabbing one of his slim arms and dragging him toward the broken window through which Reinhard had escaped.

"Careful not to bite your tongue!"

"Wait, hold on, hold up, hold *anything*! Ahhh?!"

But Julius was not interested in Ferris's suggestions; he swept the young man into his arms and threw himself at the window. With the echoes of Ferris's drawn-out scream trailing behind them, an astonishing flight began. They had seemingly murdered the military general of another country, kidnapped an emperor, and now they were on the run.

It hardly seemed like things could get any worse.

8

It wasn't long until the bad news reached Miklotov and Bordeaux in the guest chamber.

"Three of your knights murdered Balleroy Temeglyph, one of the Nine Divine Generals, then kidnapped His Majesty the Emperor and fled. These are grave and unprecedented events. We are going to have to take the two of you into custody. I trust you have no objections?"

So declared the man leading the mass of imperial troops who crowded into the guest chamber. He was an imposing figure, whose scarred face spoke of a long history in battle. He wore golden armor, and his hair grew out like

the mane of a lion. Goz Ralphone was his name, and he was another one of the famous Nine Divine Generals of Volakia.

Miklotov listened to Goz and observed the dozen or more soldiers with him, all of whom were on high alert. Quickly perceiving the difference in fighting strength between them, he cast a glance at the bald giant beside him and ran his fingers through his own, long beard. "Mm. I should say not. I only hope you won't be too rough on these old bones."

"Of course. Though, you understand that depending on how this situation develops, we can't promise we'll always be so merciful. In the event anything should happen to our emperor, we'll be sending your heads back to your kingdom without your necks beneath them. Best spend your time praying your knights don't do anything ill-advised."

Despite being at the head of a crew of soldiers clearly out for blood, Goz himself was eminently reasonable. But at heart, he felt no differently from the guards behind him. In fact, his feelings might have been burning even hotter. Miklotov, knowing anything he said might simply pour more oil on the flames, indicated his assent with only a nod, then watched as the Divine General turned his great back on them.

With no further words, but with storming footsteps, Goz withdrew, leaving Miklotov and Bordeaux in the care of several men assigned to keep an eye on them. With guards posted both inside and out, the opulent chambers suddenly felt no different than a jail cell. A creeping tension in the air came from the evil looks the imperial soldiers kept giving the two aged men. In the eyes of the Volakians, the two of them were nothing more than coconspirators in the abduction of their emperor and deserved no better. There was no telling whether the three fugitives would come back to try to free Miklotov and Bordeaux.

"If we truly had designs against the empire, then trading the heads of two elders for the emperor himself… Well, one can't say it's an unreasonable exchange."

"You're going to get us in trouble, Master Miklotov."

"Ho-ho-ho. I'm sorry, it rather slipped out."

Miklotov was running his fingers thoughtfully through his beard, but Bordeaux regarded him with a crease of his great eyebrows. He sat beside Miklotov and looked at the soldiers around them. "What do you make of all this, Master Miklotov?"

"*Incomprehensible* is the word I would choose. Things have taken an unaccountably strange turn—and so quickly."

"Don't figure the boys we brought along are simply utter fools?"

"If they were, then the fault would lie in the judgment of the captain of the royal guard who chose them, and in ourselves for allowing them to accompany us. I certainly hope that is not the case…but I wouldn't expect such logic to convince anyone in the empire."

"A general dead and the emperor kidnapped… Hmph, that's no laughing matter."

The emperor and the Nine Divine Generals were all pillars of Volakia's seemingly unshakable imperial system. It was almost inconceivable that they could have been threatened so easily by some emissaries admitted from another nation.

"In which case, I believe His Majesty himself may be the key to what is happening here. I don't know why they took him, but there seems to be many things about this that can only be understood by those present."

"Guess we've got no choice but to trust them, whatever they're thinking. Never been so frustrated in my life."

"____"

Bordeaux let out a sigh. Beside him, Miklotov was silent, lost in thought. It was almost as if he were ignoring Bordeaux, but the giant didn't say anything about it. The two of them had known each other for a long time now. Bordeaux trusted the sage's judgment and perception more than that of anyone else in the Kingdom of Lugunica. It was Miklotov's role to be lost in thought. It was not Bordeaux's.

His job was to see that the greatest sage in Lugunica returned home safely.

If the worst should happen, Bordeaux would use his own massive body as Miklotov's shield. "Not sure I could buy us a whole lot of time though—not these days…" He touched a hand to his wrinkled, aged face and let a quiet sigh slip out. If he had his wish, the actions and judgment of the young escorts they'd traveled with would help break this deadlock that had set upon them. "Gotta hope this generation's knights can pull their weight…"

9

Bursting through the window of the great chamber, the runaway knights

landed hard in the garden below.

The perimeter around the Crystal Palace was almost impervious; if they couldn't somehow avoid the seemingly ever-present eye of the imperial soldiers, they would never manage their escape. Hiding would prove a fruitless effort. As word spread that the emperor had been kidnapped, the troops would only grow more zealous. If this flight was to succeed, they first needed to escape the net before it tightened any further.

"___"

Silently, avoiding any lines of sight, they worked their way out of the garden, vaulting over the towering castle walls with their own strength and the help of some wind magic. It was comparatively easier to get out from the inside than it was the other way around.

Once on the far side of the walls, they kept running, heading not for the bustling town, but aiming to disappear into the forest that grew within the boundaries of the capital. When they were sure there was no one else around, they finally stopped.

"Looks like we're all in one piece," Julius said. He had assigned Alo, the air spirit, to detect any shifts in the atmosphere. Ire, the fire spirit, would watch for sources of heat. With his two sentries in place, the young man was satisfied there was nothing unusual in the immediate vicinity.

"Ugh," Ferris groaned from his spot cradled in Julius's arms. "How did this *happen*?"

"Complaining won't change anything, Ferris. And we can't expect things to get any less urgent, either. Our friends back at the castle are going to have their hands full while we're leading this merry chase."

"Yeah, sure, you're right, I know. C'mon, let me down already." Ferris pursed his lips but stood at last upon the grassy earth.

Reinhard likewise let go of Vincent, whom he had been carrying the way Julius had carried the demi-human. Removing the sword at his hip, he knelt in the most respectful bow he could make. "Emperor Vincent, I offer my heartfelt apologies for my impudence, and for any discomfort I inflicted on you."

"It matters not; I have deigned it necessary. Indeed, I must, for your actions are quite in line with my own thinking. But I must ask: How is it that there was no breath of wind though we traveled at such speed?"

"Sire, it is because of the wind-free blessing, just like that of a land

dragon."

"It troubles me that a child of man such as yourself should possess that quality. But that is a topic for another hour." Vincent stopped and turned his dark eyes on Julius. His gaze was as sharp as a sword, and it caused Julius to straighten up. The emperor brushed off his dark garments and said, "You did well to understand my intentions. I commend you."

"I'm grateful, Your Majesty… However, if *The Guillotine of Magrizza* had not come up already in the throne room, I doubt I would have made the connection. I'm deeply impressed by Your Majesty's quick thinking and ability to make use of the reference. Though, we can't be certain no one else in the room recognized it…"

"Oh, I believe I can. None of the rabble in that room know the value of a single letter. What was most crucial was that I vacated the place with all possible speed." Vincent's voice was quiet, completely unfazed; his eyes were half closed.

Taking careful stock of what the ruler of Volakia might've been thinking, Julius at last turned his thoughts to the scene in the castle that had started this entire bizarre episode: the awful sight of Reinhard and Balleroy amid a pool of blood. "Reinhard, I want you to tell me about earlier. What in the world happened?"

Ferris put in his two cents as well. "Yeah, Ferri was wondering the same thing! I thought he must have attacked you first, but how did it even start? Spill the beans!"

Reinhard's eyes drooped, and he picked up his sword, his constant companion, from the ground and returned the weapon to its spot at his hip. "Believe me, I want to tell you everything, but…I'm just as confused. It all happened so suddenly."

"You mean he came at you so suddenly, you had to react before you knew what you were doing?"

"Ferris, don't interrupt," Julius admonished, to which the cat-boy replied "Fiiine," and went quiet. The purple-haired knight looked Reinhard over from head to toe and said, "I'm no Ferris, but it doesn't look to me like you have any wounds. I doubt you were attacked. Not that I think you couldn't defeat Balleroy without taking a scratch, but…"

"Even I couldn't take on Master Balleroy and expect to come away untouched. That would be true even if my powers weren't limited by this

collar." Reinhard let his fingers fall to his neck and brush the Collar of Submission. So long as he wore it, he would be unable to make use of his full strength. As immensely powerful as Reinhard was, it was still difficult to imagine him defeating one of Volakia's top generals without so much as a single bruise.

"You're saying that Master Balleroy did not fall by your hand, then."

"I…don't know."

"I'm sorry?" Just as Julius had begun to believe the truth would exonerate the Sword Saint, the young man gave a previously inconceivable answer. It was ambiguous and not an outright refusal. How could he not have known?

"You remember I received that summons. They led me into that big room. I was told to wait there for His Majesty. But…"

"But His Majesty never came," Julius finished.

Vincent, now the subject of the conversation, winked. Encouraged by the emperor's silence, Reinhard continued. "Master Balleroy was already there. The other soldiers you saw on the floor were in there, too. They'd said something about being His Majesty's bodyguard, but…"

"——" There was silence from the others.

"One thing I'm sure of: I felt something weigh down heavily on my consciousness for a moment. I feel like I'm missing a second or two of my own life. When that weight disappeared, that was how I found myself."

"…So you sort of went into a dream for a few seconds, and when you woke up, everyone was dead?" Reinhard had been choosing his words carefully, but Ferris summed up the situation more bluntly. After his tactless conclusion, the demi-human said "Hmmmm," as though it was all a lot to swallow. "I'm real sorry, but *mew* have to agree that sounds totally made-up."

"You'll notice I'm not having a lot of luck explaining myself."

There wasn't much Reinhard could say to Ferris's unsparing assessment. Julius looked equally disturbed, but for a different reason. "I don't think any of this was accidental. Reinhard, I think you were led into a trap."

"…Yeah. Framed for the murder of one of the empire's generals."

"'*Framed'* is a funny way of putting it," Vincent broke in. "The inhabitants of the castle are no doubt convinced you did it. Considering that you sacrificed any opportunity to explain yourself when you kidnapped me and ran away."

“Hold on,” Ferris said, raising an eyebrow. “I hate to say this to someone as important as yourself, sir, but if Reinhard was framed, then wouldn’t it make sense if the culprit was someone from the empire? You can’t act like this has nothing to do with you…”

“You suggest I should investigate seriously rather than engage in idle speculation? I believe you were the one who said this man’s testimony is hopelessly flimsy. Who could he convince with a story like that? Allow me to be clear: The people of the empire are no friends of the Sword Saint.”

“Argh…” Ferris’s face stiffened at Vincent’s brusque rebuttal. The ruler of Volakia was right, of course. The only reason Julius and Ferris gave any credence at all to Reinhard’s explanation was because they knew and trusted him personally. Without that, all who were present had to admit that circumstances looked grave for the red-haired man.

However…

“…If you’ll forgive my asking, sir, why did you come to that room?”

“Julius?” Reinhard looked quizzically at the other knight, who had bowed his head as he posed a question to the emperor. Julius took note of this look from his peripheral vision, refusing to take his eyes off of Vincent.

“Ferris and I saw Reinhard led out of our guest chambers, ostensibly at your summons. If you had come to the throne room to speak with him, that would make sense. But in that case…”

“You question why I allowed you to carry me off and create such a spectacle?”

“…Yes, Your Majesty. Further, it was you yourself who quoted *The Guillotine of Magrizza*, implicitly ordering us to take you… I can only imagine you have some deep design the likes of us cannot fathom.”

“Do you imagine, or do you wish and hope? …Well, no matter. You have the right of it, in broad terms. Passing marks for you.” Vincent, one eye closed, snorted softly. The moment he did so, the tension in the grove eased slightly; Ferris found himself letting out a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding. The unseen friction between the knights of Lugunica and the emperor of Volakia vanished. At least, Ferris felt that was so.

“Sword Saint, I suppose that you took me captive in order to cover yourself.”

“As you say, Your Majesty. I’ve never encountered such a pitch of hatred as I felt in that room, and despite the impropriety, I secured your person.”

"'A pitch of hatred.' Indeed. I believe it would be most surprising if anyone in the vicinity of that room *didn't* want to kill you."

"As I said—I've never encountered the like."

That was a natural explanation of what seemed a reckless action on Reinhard's part—taking Vincent hostage on the way to kidnapping him. It was as good as announcing that all the soldiers of the empire lined up at the door were nothing before Reinhard.

"An insolent man. You seem to know no fear." Vincent's remark could have been taken as embarrassing to the empire, and he dropped it there. Next, he turned to meet Julius's golden eyes. "I chose to go to that place because of the pulse in my Crystal Palace."

"Pulse, sir?"

"I do not intend to share the details with you. Nor have we the time to do so."

"The time—"

Julius frowned, wondering why the ruler of Volakia would mention the time, or lack thereof. Suddenly, his spirits, which had been patrolling the area, simultaneously sent him a warning. Wind and fire—both presences were approaching in some form.

"There, now put on a good show. Before I turn my back on you," Vincent said to them with a sadistic smile. Almost before he finished speaking, Julius looked up and discovered an enemy overhead. A ball of hostility raced toward them from far above the trees.

"Yaaaahhhhh!!" A faint scream passed above, coming from something revolving at immensely high speed. Spinning on its side, the enemy looked like a silver disc—and it was heading straight for Julius…

"Shi—!"

He brought his knight's sword up in a flash, meeting the disc in midair. Steel met with a metallic sound and sent through the earth a sharp shock wave that Julius could feel in his soles. He felt the vibration shaking all through his arms. He had managed to avoid the ambush at the last moment. Julius swept out forcefully with his still-tingling arms, shoving his enemy backward. His opponent landed on the ground on all fours and stared up at him from a low stance. There was both vigilance and hatred in those eyes.

"Ahhhhh, friggin' shit! That hurt, 'ey! 'Ey, 'ey, 'ey, 'ey! 'Ey! Damn it all!" The vulgar tirade came from a demi-human small enough to be taken for a

child. His entire body was covered in brown fur, some speckled with black. His mouth was full of sharp fangs, and he had a face similar to that of the dog-people—he was a young hyena-man. His eyes flashed with rage, and his entire body seemed to clatter with metallic sounds. It was likely because of the veritable armory of weapons hanging from the belts all over his body.

It seemed to be the demi-human's copious fur that kept the blades of his own weapons from harming him. No, there was another reason: namely that he was immensely skilled in the handling of all the tools he carried. He exuded an almost feral presence—simple, but not to be underestimated. This was the spirit of a monstrously powerful warrior.

"Gah, damn it, that friggin' hurt… Aw, hey, Your Majesty! Shit! Old Goz was right; you Lugunican shits are no slouches—but damn!"

"A hyena-man covered head to toe in weaponry… Master Groovy Gumlet, I presume," Julius said.

"Nghaaa?! Screw you, knowin' so much about a guy!" He scratched his head and snorted angrily. But he didn't deny it. That was as good as admitting that he was indeed who Julius thought he was.

"Your Majesty, this man…," Reinhard said.

"…Seems to be known to your friend there," Vincent replied. "One of the Nine Divine Generals. He yells and shouts loudly enough to distinguish himself even among the colorful ranks of the Nine."

"That's the emperor, all freakin' right! Knows how to give a man a compliment!" Groovy exclaimed. He was smoothing out the fur on his face with both hands, looking closely at his opponents. "I heard you iced Balleroy, you pricks. Let me tell ya something—he was a good man. Laughed too damn much, and I always thought he was too thin for his own good… But he was a good man."

"We offer you our heartfelt condolences on his loss," Julius said. "But we beg you to hear what we have to say as well. Master Balleroy's death raises a number of unanswered—"

"Don't try 'n' talk your way out of this! I ain't even listening, pissants! Mogro!" he barked, exclaiming a word Julius and the others didn't recognize. But they soon discovered what it meant.

"Eeeeek?!"

"Ferris?!" Julius spun toward the shout to find Ferris floating in the air. No, not floating, exactly. His foot had been grabbed, and he was hanging

upside down. The new assailant seemed to be a brownish-mineral humanoid construct who had appeared from underground. No sooner had Julius registered the impression than he connected the dots in his mind.

Volakia was home to a wide variety of demi-humans, including many unusual bloodlines unknown in Lugunica. Among them were a people called the Steelfolk, who had minerals in lieu of flesh-and-blood bodies. One of them ranked among Volakia's Nine Generals. And their name was…

"Mogro Hagane!"

"You know well. Very well. Frightening." Clods of earth fell from the massive being, who stood nearly nine feet tall. Their entire body was made of metal, except the joints, which appeared to be green gemstones—or perhaps something similar to magic stones. They looked like a giant stone doll made by something inhuman. But the intimidation radiating from Mogro was no different from what Groovy gave off; it was menacing and powerful.

"It came from underground…completely avoiding Ire's and Alo's patrols!"

Underground, one could approach without being detected by the elements of wind or fire. Mogro's sneaking abilities had caught them completely unawares.

"H-h-help meeee!" Ferris cried, dancing in the air. Mogro looked strong enough to crush the demi-human's slim form in their hand. Julius and Reinhard would have to get the boy back before that happened.

"Groovy Gumlet and Mogro Hagane." As Julius tried to concoct a strategy, Vincent added his own view of their pursuers. "Sending numbers Six and Eight of the Nine Generals is a poor way to retrieve one's sovereign."

The Nine Divine Generals of Volakia, as the name implied, was a group of different people. They bore numbers from One to Nine, with Nine being thought of as the weakest, and One said to be the strongest. In that sense, they could have been pursued by much more terrible foes than Six and Eight.

"I fear the empire's very finest warriors would have represented overkill against our abilities," Julius replied politely, drawing his sword. "Reinhard!" They were dealing with two of Volakia's Nine Generals; it was hardly a moment for a calm conversation.

These opponents sought to retrieve the emperor and likely planned to apprehend Julius and his companions as well.

“We can’t let them do as they please,” Julius declared as he stepped in with his knight’s blade flashing forward. He was aiming for Mogro’s limb, the arm holding Ferris up. If he could free the young man, then they could simply flee.

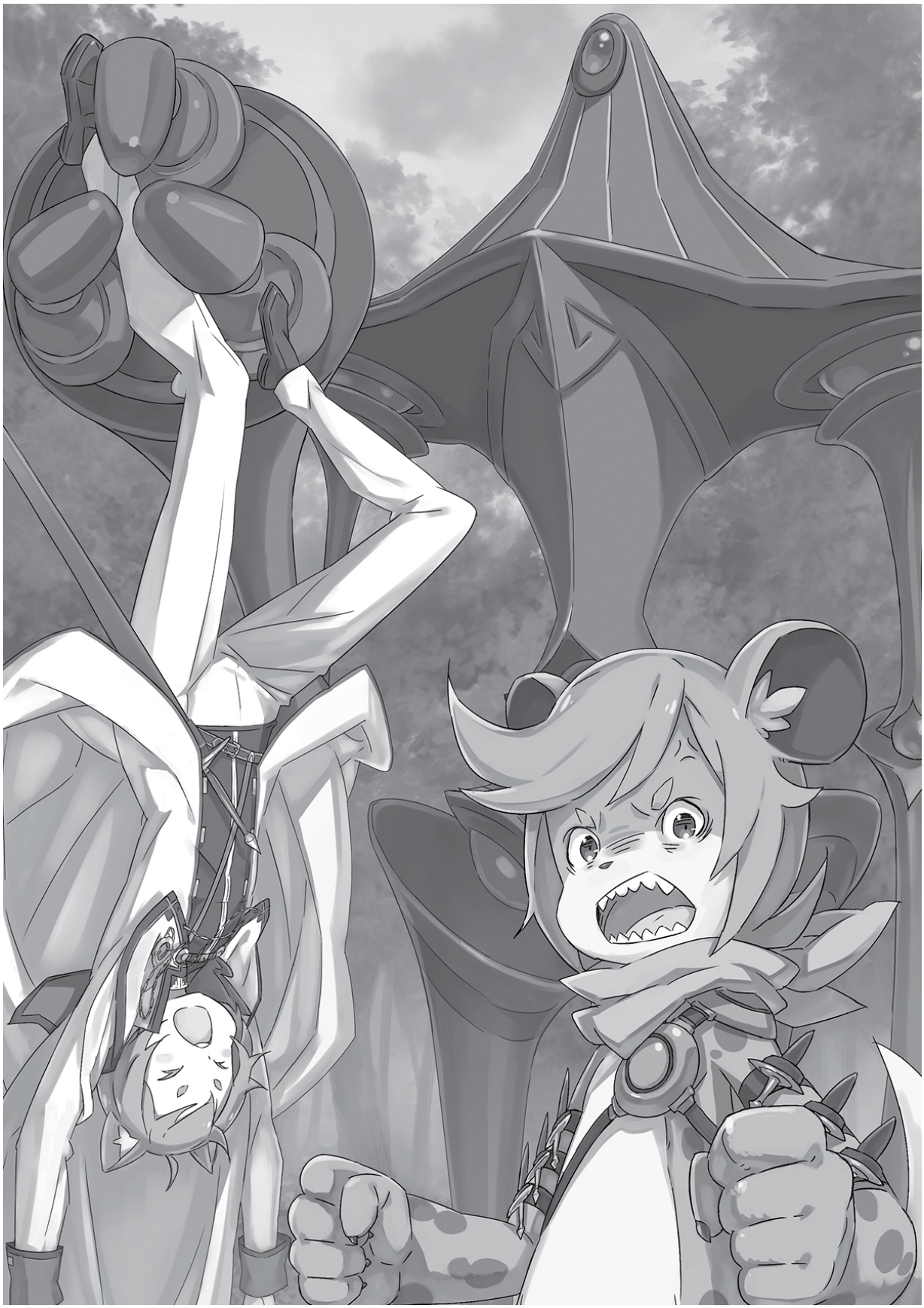
Harming or killing two of the Nine Generals would make their situation vastly more complicated, even if those two had been pursuing them. As such, Julius would have to fight with utmost care…

When Groovy saw the noncommittal strike, though, he immediately wheeled on Julius. “’Ey, ’ey, ’ey, ’s wrong with you? Why you assumin’ you can win, jackass?”

The pursuers took the half-hearted attack as an affront. So far from making things better, it turned out to be a grave miscalculation that only stoked the flames of Groovy and Mogro’s eagerness for battle.

“___”

An attack was launched at Julius from the rear with stupendous speed. This time, the strike clearly intended to inflict a mortal wound; it was nothing like the battle’s opening blow, which had meant only to keep him at bay. Groovy produced two small hatchets from his belts and closed on Julius. He intended to dismember the knight at the neck and hips.



“Sorry, but I can’t let you hurt my friend.” At almost the same instant, Reinhard was covering Julius’s back, catching the blows from both hatchets. One of the Sword Saint’s strikes caught Groovy in the wrist, while he stomped his long legs firmly into the earth in a powerful stance.

“Tsk! Screw you! Your *friend*? That’s the same thing I called Balleroy, goddamnit!”

“——” Reinhard pursed his lips as Groovy berated him in compensation for the forestalled physical assault. The hyena-man’s rage prevented the Sword Saint from having any opportunity to explain the truth.

At the same moment, Julius unleashed a blow that connected with Mogro’s sturdy arm. The attack landed precisely on the wrist of their right hand—the one still clutching Ferris. But with a sharp sound of impact, his sword simply bounced off. Steelfolk bodies were every bit as hard as they looked. One would probably need a metal cutter to do any harm to Mogro.

“Hrgh…”

“Eeeeek?!”

First the clash with Groovy and now his attack on Mogro. Julius’s right arm was still tingling from the two impacts as he drew his sword back—at which point, Mogro’s huge form danced about curiously before launching a powerful front kick. A geyser of earth shot forth as though the ground had exploded, and Ferris’s scream faded away as he was swung around. Hearing it, Julius didn’t fall backward but lunged at Mogro’s center to avoid the attack, slamming his sword into the inner thigh and the back of the creature’s hips—places that would be crippling blows on a human opponent. But all he got for his trouble was another shock and a difficult-to-control rebound. The purple-haired knight moved in as close as he dared in order to get at the inside of Mogro’s legs, and the sword dance between him and the metallic warrior began to appear like a whirlwind.

“…!”

Julius slammed into his opponent’s vital points one by one, dodging Mogro’s blows with some difficulty as he displayed his swordsmanship. Julius didn’t know much about the Steelfolk, but their overwhelming menace and their strength, which could obviously take his life with even a glancing blow, froze the blood in his veins.

He took no pride in going toe to toe with one of the empire’s strongest fighters. He had no chance to revel in his own swordsmanship or admire the

power of his enemy. He was spending this moment at his absolute limit…

"You, strong. Me, surprised."

Unlike Julius, who needed every ounce of his concentration and skill just to stay on even footing, Mogro still had the wherewithal to offer a word of praise. Truth be told, the Steelfolk's fighting style suggested nothing of training or discipline. The general simply swung and struck in a manner that came naturally, as if trying to squash a small animal. Mogro had risen to be one of the Nine Divine Generals simply by virtue of an immense innate strength. It was a sort of natural advantage that stood quite apart from talent or genius.

"Surprised. Little more serious." With that, Mogro brought an upraised arm down at Julius. The knight dodged it by the skin of his teeth, the ground beside him exploding at the force of the impact. But Julius himself had never been Mogro's target. The general had sought to tear up the ground itself.

"Wha—?!"

The instant after his fist landed in the earth, Mogro began to spin their huge body at an incredible speed as they drilled down to the ground. They moved through the soil as readily as one might swim through water—and they were still holding Ferris.

"——" It was, of course, Mogro's tremendous sturdiness that allowed the general to perform this feat. A typical human who was forced to do the same would find the flesh torn from their limbs, their bones broken, and their organs turned to mush.

Such was the danger Ferris was in. Julius adjusted the grip on his saber and called out, "Reinhard!" He was going to give up his fruitless attacks on Mogro. Reinhard, still fighting with Groovy, instantly understood what Julius wanted and came flying over. They switched places as Reinhard landed a kick directly on Mogro's torso. Having traded opponents, Julius's blade met Groovy's hatchets head-on.

"Grmf." Steelfolk bodies were most at home underground, but Mogro found theirs flying through the air. To think that this human had launched them so effortlessly, despite the fact that the metal creature weighed many hundreds of pounds. It was a feat that painted Reinhard as much more than a swordsman.

Reinhard was indeed a knight of utmost ability, but the so-called Dragon Sword he carried was the most powerful blade in Lugunica, a treasure he

chose to draw only against the most extraordinary opponents. Thus, Reinhard frequently fought empty-handed. The kick he had just delivered demonstrated he was well justified in doing so.

"He's got the crazy-red hair, the crazy kick… Even I didn't expect the Sword Saint to be such a tough mother!"

"Surely, you can think of a better way to put it than that. Such vulgarity doesn't suit him."

"I ain't gonna say it again! I ain't even listening to you, shithead!" Groovy's weapons again clashed with Julius's own. Like Mogro's whirlwind fighting style, Groovy's two-handed approach seemed to be more wild instinct than honed technique. Perhaps he had developed and trained his sword fighting in combat, based purely on what worked best for his body—but no, Groovy wasn't using a sword. What the hyena-man was doing couldn't even be called sword fighting.

"____"

As they slashed at each other, Groovy flung his hatchets through the air, immediately drawing his next weapon. From his belts, he produced a pair of glove-like things that covered his fists. He let fly with one metal-covered fist, and Julius intercepted it with the butt of his sheath. He drove toward his opponent's hips, hoping to take advantage of the opening he'd created and constrain Groovy's movements…

"—Gah!"

But an instant later, there was a rush of air, and Julius fell back with a cry of pain. The blow had landed on his stomach, and his knight's uniform was flecked with blood.

He had been hit. But there hadn't been so much as a flinch to indicate the attack was coming. His eyes widened as he tried to comprehend how he had been struck, his reaction prompting Groovy to open his mouth wide and laugh. "Gah-ha-ha! Y' like that? Magic knuckles. The gloves've got magic stones in them that can fire spells. They're just big lumps of mana—and after one hit, they're nothing but pretty rocks. Still, they're more than enough to beat the tar out of a shithead!"

"Magic knuckles…" Julius had never heard of such a thing; he was amazed to find them so powerful. Even if they were inert most of the time, such weapons would be more than effective if a single blow could decide a battle.

Although the wound to the knight's side wasn't deep, it was more than enough to slow him down. It was doubtless it would make a big difference against an opponent as skilled as Groovy. If that was the case…

"Oh-ho?"

"Forgive me, but you're not the only one who's kept something in reserve."

Groovy raised an eyebrow at the sudden change Julius exhibited. The scrapes around his belly wound glowed with a soft, blue light, and the bleeding stopped. Meanwhile, a red light enveloped his sword, and green and yellow ones enclosed around Julius's body. The four lights came from greater spirits, each with a different element and power.

"So you're a spirit mage! But so many of 'em… Damn, you must be good!"

"I'm gratified to hear you say that. It seems that's the first thing I've been good at all day; I'm ill-suited as a negotiator."

"Heh!" Groovy gave an irritable click of his tongue, as if it had been a joke. Julius, however, hadn't been kidding. Everything he'd said was true.

Qua, the water spirit, closed up his wounds, while the fire spirit, Ire, made his saber burn red-hot. And with the spirits Alo of the air and Ake of the earth upon him, the knight's physical abilities were improved. It was this combination of techniques that had earned Julius the moniker *Spirit Knight*.

Booooonngg!

Julius, garbed in light, stood confronting Groovy when something huge and long crashed in between them. It was Mogro's arm, torn off at the elbow. There was an instant when Julius realized it was their left arm, which had been holding Ferris. Then he looked back.

"I'm sorry for the wait, Ferris."

"Oh, th-thank goodness! Oh dear! What took you so long? That thing almost killed me! I was scared out of my wits!"

"My apologies."

Rescued from Mogro's hand, Ferris clung to Reinhard's side, complaining loudly. The Sword Saint merely gave a wan smile, and Julius let out a short breath of relief. He saw now that one of Reinhard's arms, the same one that now supported Ferris, looked as if it had delivered a knifehand strike. The sharpness required for such a blow to take off Mogro's arm was unimaginable. In all the world, Reinhard might have been the only person

who would ever be capable to sever a solid-steel appendage with an empty-handed technique like that.

"Damn it, Mogro! Butt out when a guy's fighting, for hell's sake! Oh, for —They're beatin' you into teeny-tiny pieces, damn it all!"

"Wrong, you are being; wrong. I, Groovy, not your minion."

"I don't give a shit what you think you are!" Groovy went over and gave Mogro's lolling arm a vicious kick. Mogro grabbed it out of the air and pushed it up against the shoulder it had been cleaved from. In an instant, the wound was healed. Steelfolk, it was said, could heal any damage done to themselves, so long as their brain and heart remained intact. Combined with the hardiness of their bodies, they nearly seemed invincible.

Confronted with all that had happened, the fighters of both the kingdom and empire became more wary of each other. Now that they had really begun to put their cards on the table, the chances of a stalemate seemed ever greater…

"I have had quite enough of these boring displays." The remark had come from the emperor, who until that moment had kept his distance from the battlefield.

"___"

The spiraling passion amid those in the forest cooled immediately. Indeed, it had been snuffed by an altogether more commanding presence than soldiers on the field of war. It was impossible to explain logically why it so thoroughly froze conflict. Any of them could have physically overpowered Vincent—one with the sword, another with magic. So why did the ruler of Volakia seem to take hold of their very souls with just a word?

"Groovy, Mogro. What do you think it means to retrieve me?"

"Y-Your Majesty? Well, uh…"

"Does this look to you like an appropriate stage for your childish performances?"

The tone of Vincent's voice was unwavering. Yet everyone present understood that the man had given an ultimatum. Faced with the emperor's simmering anger, Groovy's and Mogro's attitudes changed immediately. Their eagerness for battle, the sense that they had all the time in the world, vanished. In its place was the aura of warriors who no longer had the luxury of messing around. That is to say—the aura of two of the Nine Divine Generals, the strongest fighters in the empire.

“Right, Mogro, no more games. We get damn serious, right from the first shot.”

“Understood. Comprehended. And agreed.”

Now that they were on the same page, Groovy and Mogro prepared to launch themselves at their opponents. Julius stiffened, readying for the change in battle. But then…

“Julius.”

A voice called from behind, and Julius spared a glance backward. Reinhard stood with Ferris, now safely on the ground. The Sword Saint’s blue eyes were locked on his fellow knight. Julius read their intent immediately, and he understood before Reinhard even had to speak. He spent an instant in thought, but then he answered:

“You don’t mind my leaving this to you?”

“All right by me. If they get the emperor back, we lose. Master Mogro makes that difficult. So…”

With that, Reinhard stepped in front of Julius. Mogro’s ability to travel underground, and thereby avoid Julius’s security web, was dangerous. There was no one better for pursuing a fleeing foe. Julius didn’t want to take his eyes off the metal creature.

But he would have to. Reinhard intended to buy time.

“I’ll leave you one of my Sprouts. Use it as a guide to get back to me… I sincerely hope you won’t erase it.”

“I wish you would simply say you just don’t like the idea of being separated from me.” Reinhard half smiled, and his face in profile showed not the slightest distress at having to take the rearguard.

His ease appeared to incense Groovy, who clicked his tongue loudly. “Pfah! You want a war with us anyway, Sword Saint. I’m done toyin’. I ain’t ever gonna be able to face *my* buddies again if we let you pricks just push us around!”

“I’m afraid there’s been a grave misunderstanding…but I don’t suppose you’re in any mood to listen.”

“Damn right I’m not! So what’s your plan, now that your little negotiations have failed?”

“To knock you down and *make* you listen to me.”

“You’ll die first!”

Both the thoroughly enraged Groovy and the preternaturally silent Mogro

attacked Reinhard simultaneously. Groovy had his hatchets out again, while Mogro's opening gambit was to dive into the earth, beginning the fight from underground. Reinhard charged forward to meet them.

Julius watched them exchange the first blows, then ran over to the emperor, who was simply standing by. He grabbed his arm. "Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty! Ferris!"

"Huh? Wh-what? You sure Reinhard's okay?"

"We have to trust him! The two of us need to get His Majesty out of here!"

Ferris was flustered, but he accepted the brief explanation with a nod and began to work his way deeper into the forest. Julius followed him at a run, pulling the emperor behind him.

"Hey, jackass! You can't treat His Majesty like—!"

"Pardon me, but I don't believe either of us can afford to turn our backs on the enemy."

Groovy had been distracted by the fleeing trio, but Reinhard refused to allow Groovy to give chase. Alone, the Sword Saint held back the howling hyena-man and the relentlessly attacking Steelfolk. Reinhard being who he was, Julius sincerely doubted that anything would happen to him, but even so…

"Reinhard, stay alive!"

The knight still had to at least spare a few words for the friend he left alone on the battlefield.

10

They ran through the woods, alert to everything around them. Two of the Nine Divine Generals had chased them down and stalled them for no small amount of time. Julius and the others could assume their little refuge was surrounded by imperial soldiers. So much for fleeing to a deserted area…

"To compel the emperor himself to run is most uncouth. You don't wish to pick me up and carry me, as the Sword Saint did?"

"It's possible, sir, but I can't guarantee it would be as comfortable as it was with him. And if another attack comes, it would be more difficult to protect you."

"Hmph. I see you are skilled at talking, if not at carrying."

With the rather dissatisfied Vincent in tow, Julius realized they were not

going to be able to hide in the traditional sense.

As they ran along the wooded path, the purple-haired knight found Vincent keeping up with him and Ferris with a remarkable degree of ease. If there was anyone whose stamina Julius was worried about, it was actually Ferris's. The boy had never been the strongest physically, and now terror and tension had reduced his reserves to nothing as he continually glanced back over his shoulder.

"Ferris, you must face forward. I'm sorry, but we can't slow down any further."

"I-I'm all right… But what about Reinhard? Is he going to be okay? We're in the empire's territory—it's not going to be easy to find each other again once we've split up, is it?"

"I've set Ire to accompany him. I doubt we'll have any trouble linking up. Right now, our concern should be the killers who attacked Master Balleroy and are after His Majesty's life." Julius tried to talk Ferris down while also returning them to the subject of what had happened at the Crystal Palace. Their discussion had been interrupted earlier, but continually running would not solve anything by itself. Nor would it be responsible to simply assume that Miklotov and Bordeaux, who were back at the palace, would take care of things.

For starters, they had no guarantees that Miklotov and Bordeaux were even still safe.

"With Goz in charge, one doubts anyone would rush to do something rash. Not least because if they were to do anything to your Miklotov and his friend, you just might repay *me* in kind."

"…I suppose that's one less thing on my mind, then," Julius said. "But there are so many things I still don't understand. May I ask you something, Your Majesty?"

"It depends on what it is. Or so I would say, but I already suspect what you have in mind. It is the 'pulse' of the Crystal Palace, no?"

Julius was shocked to realize Vincent had seen through him so completely. Naturally, he had been trying to ease the talk in that direction, but the emperor had a tremendous gift for conversation, along with the ability to make it seem as though he had no such gift at all.

"The pulse—*mew* mentioned it earlier, right? Just what is it?"

"I should think you are aware that the castle is made from a great many

magic crystals. And you know also that some of its defenses leverage their power."

"Yes, we've heard tell."

The Crystal Palace was famous for both its offensive and defensive capabilities. Its density of mana and the carefully calculated positions of its many magic crystals were things Julius had confirmed for himself not long before. But he didn't understand its connection to what Vincent was now saying.

"Thus, the Crystal Palace stores tremendous amounts of mana simply by existing. Knowing that, do you need further explanation, spirit user?" The emperor's tone was almost teasing. Julius considered the man's words for a moment.

"…You can't mean—the Crystal Palace is…"

"Alive? Yes."

The knight felt his thoughts come to a hard stop. The Crystal Palace, center of the capital of Lupghana and the symbol of the entire Volakian Empire, was not just a fortress of unparalleled offensive and defensive capabilities but had concentrated so much mana that it had become a sort of spirit in its own right. Now that he knew, the conclusion seemed inescapable.

Vincent chuckled as he observed Julius's reaction. "Now there's one more reason none of you can be allowed to leave the empire alive."

"*Y-you* chose to answer the question!"

"The answer to *any* question you might ask of me will inevitably touch something crucial to Volakia. It's only natural. You know perfectly well who I am; don't make me laugh."

"Grrr…!" Ferris's face went red at Vincent's taunting tone. He didn't know how serious the emperor actually was, but what he said was true enough. When the man spoke, his words were like a gateway to the depths of the Volakian Empire. Listen carelessly, and anything could happen to you. Even so, the danger had yielded them something.

"If the Crystal Palace literally has a pulse…then when Master Balleroy fell and Reinhard blacked out, it's possible a special spell was used."

"Clever. But hold back your deductions for a while. I rather prefer the reactions of your beast-boy there."

"Watch it, Your Majesty!"

Vincent had confirmed Julius's suspicion, but he didn't neglect to work in

a dig at Ferris. It might simply seem like a show of how calm he was, but it might have been the emperor's little trick for getting through such stressful situations. How this behavior was interpreted likely varied from one individual to the next. In any event, it was far more conducive to a conversation than either staunchly denying there was anyone after them or falling into utter pessimism.

The pulse of the Crystal Palace, Balleroy's death, and the astonishing change that had overcome Reinhard. If all this was somehow bound up with an attempt on the emperor's life, then the problem was that they would have to return to the palace and—

But Julius's thoughts didn't get any further. He suddenly froze.

"Julius?" Ferris quickly came to a stop alongside him. Vincent likewise halted a few steps behind them, his keen black eyes studying the knight. But the swordsman didn't react to either Ferris's call or Vincent's gaze.

He had other things to worry about.

"Ooh. Spotted me already? And from that distance to boot?"

The voice, affectedly nonchalant, came to Julius and the others from farther into the woods. Ferris's eyes went wide, and he turned toward the source of the noise. When it came to detecting someone's presence, if nothing else, Ferris's intuition was every bit as good as Julius's. Now he worked all his senses—sharpened by the demi-human blood in his veins—putting his ears, nose, and eyes to the task of finding the enemy. That the cat-boy's own reaction was so belated was a testament to this figure, who had been concealed as naturally as if they were a part of the forest itself.

"____"

Without another word, a single, young-looking form worked their leisurely way around the fallen leaves, moving toward the group. He was a youthful man of rather peculiar quality. His clothes were a mix of bright blue and subdued peach-pink, much like those worn by the citizens of Kararagi, a city-state in the west. He wore handwoven zori, or reed sandals. His deep-blue hair was tied back behind his head, and he had a surprisingly friendly smile. However, at his hip were two swords—katanas, as they were called, also in the Kararagi style.

At first glance, he might have seemed like nothing more than a boy playing dress-up. His features were so soft that he could have been mistaken for a woman, an impression reinforced by his slim frame. Standing face-to-face with the man immediately dispelled any such impressions, however. What opposed Julius now was something beyond his imagination.

The young man stopped several feet ahead of the purple-haired knight, staring at him intently. Then, as if oblivious to what Julius was thinking, he exclaimed “Oh-ho!” and slapped his knee. “From this distance, I can see how handsome you are! And your beast-friend over there is lovely, too! The three of us would look wonderful together! And to face off with His Majesty between us… Isn’t it just the most exciting thing?!”

“A-another one… Are you one of the Nine Generals, too? Aw, which number are you?!”

The young man seemed very pleased by the situation, but Ferris, thoroughly tired of being continually attacked, made an exasperated face. It was almost enviable how the demi-human had not realized who he was facing yet. The swordsman before them was simply that much of a monster.

“Ferris, go to His Majesty. Quickly.”

“…Julius?”

The knight urged the confused Ferris over to Vincent with a touch of his shoulder. Then he stepped forward so Ferris and the emperor were behind him, after which he drew his saber. Blue robes… They were the well-known mark of the most famous of the Nine Divine Generals.

“Cecils Segmund, I take it,” Julius said softly.

“Yes, yes, indeed, that’s me! Argh, am I really that obvious? Even an outlander knows who I am. How troublesome! Ha-ha-ha!” Cecils rubbed his head, laughing in a way that did not sound bothered at all.

At that, Ferris hid himself discreetly behind Julius. “Cecils? So he’s…”

“Oh, what’s this? You haven’t heard of me, lovely one? What a shame. Oh, maybe you’d recognize the name *The Blue Lightning of Volakia*? Even the bards sing about me!”

“The Blue Lightning… You mean the empire’s unparalleled warrior?! The monster who destroyed an entire army during the Rite of Imperial Selection all by himself?!”

“*Monster* is such a harsh word. Here’s a better way to describe me: I am Cecils Segmund, star actor standing upon the stage of this world!”

Even Ferris had no comeback for that one. He was acquainted with the man’s title; it was almost impossible not to be.

During the last Rite of Imperial Selection, this man had allied himself to Vincent, who was then no more than just another candidate for the throne, and had done much to quell the civil war that had overtaken the empire. Specifically, he had annihilated an enemy army that had come after Vincent. The fact that he had only been a teenage boy when he’d done it soon spread not only throughout the Volakian Empire, but the entire world. Such recognition ranked The Blue Lightning of Volakia among the most powerful swordsmen alive.

Cecils was likely responsible for more deaths than any other single

person in the world. His current expression showed no trace of that bloody history as he casually waved to Vincent, who remained behind Julius.

"You can relax, Your Majesty! Now that I'm here to bring you home, you've got nothing to worry about. Just *hmm* and *harrumph* like you always do and enjoy the show while I take care of these two!"

"Foolishness. Your flippant speeches never improve no matter how many times I tell you to correct them. A dunce beyond all hope… But truthfully, it is worth acknowledging your impertinence."

Julius felt a bead of cold sweat running down his cheek at that. The first half of the emperor's answer seemed to be directed at Cecils, but the last half sounded like a warning to Julius. Or perhaps that was merely the knight's imagination?

If Cecils succeeded in stealing the emperor from them, Lugunica would lose its chance to defend itself. In this moment, the saber of Julius Juukulius would determine whether there would be war between the kingdom and the empire.

"Ine, Ness," he murmured. "Lend me your power." Julius raised his sword before his face and closed his eyes as if in prayer; a white and a black glow bestowed themselves upon him. These were his last two greater spirits, over and above the four he had already used.

Cecils, eyes wide and blinking at the display, shifted the sheaths of his blades gently and said, "Oh? Are you a real spirit user? I've heard there are many like you in the north, but the only ones you run into in Volakia are evil. Very impressive—an opponent who can use a technique I'm not familiar with? Beautiful. A brilliant stage, shared by magnificent players… Wonderful! One such as I needs an excellent foil!"

"Don't you think you're being a bit hasty? I'm familiar with many tragedies that culminate in the hero losing his life. Only your own sword will determine whether you're starring in such a tragedy at this moment."

"*Bravo*, what a fantastic turn of phrase! That's the sort of line that makes a person fall in love with an actor. And such being the case…"

With a pleasant smile, Cecils calmly drew one of the swords at his hip. Then he took a single, nonchalant step toward Julius and vanished.

An instant later, faster than lightning, he delivered a blow that transcended all perception.

"Hrrgh!" Julius only just managed to block this first strike with the

upraised hilt of his saber. He hadn't deflected it consciously; it was an instinctive reaction, one born of the heightened reflexes granted to him by his greater spirits. Julius had been forced to use his trump card at the very first exchange.

"My! You managed to block that? You kingdom warriors are more capable than I thought."

Julius, keenly aware of the pain in his arm, registered the now-distant Cecils's surprise. The general had widened the gap again as quickly as he had closed it. His movements were almost instantaneous, truly as fast as lightning. Such speed certainly lived up to his title.

"Well, try, try again! Show you can follow me—unless that first time was just luck!"

"I can only ask you not to go too hard on me," Julius said, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to sound more assured than he felt. The smile on Cecils's face shifted at the remark, and The Blue Lightning struck Julius again. The saber jumped in Julius's hand with every hit. He managed to block, barely, as the clang of steel rang out.

"Wonderful, wonderful! Two, three, five, six, seven! You blocked them all! This is more than a few lucky guards! I've hit the jackpot! Now, *this* is exciting!"

There was a sharp sound of a kick off the ground, and in the next instant came the critical flash of a sword. Again, Julius narrowly managed to parry on instinct, as he listened to Cecils's laughter get closer and then farther away again. The strikes came from every direction, demanding the utmost from the knight's swordsmanship. It was all he could do to avoid being sliced in half; the man was nowhere near swift enough to provide any counterattack. Cecils's movements and strikes were too quick, leaving no opportunity for Julius to create an opening by passing his opponent's blade, as he usually did. The physical enhancements provided by his greater spirits wouldn't last forever, either.

Watching Julius struggling to maintain a defense, Ferris began to sweat. "Th-this is looking bad… Sweet li'l Ferri has zero combat capability…!"

"Our saving grace is that Cecils is merely amusing himself. But that's not all. That swordsman is as much a dupe as any of them. The comedy is that he doesn't wish to be."

"Huh?" Ferris was baffled by Vincent's words. Cecils, who had just now

created a large distance between himself and his opponent, quickly demonstrated the accuracy of the emperor's words.

The kimono-clad young man cocked his head and scuffed his sandals on the ground as he said, "I can't quite shake the feeling that I'm not quite as… lightning-y as usual. Maybe there's some kind of spell on me?"

"Just a nasty little trick from a man who can't do anything better. To think there's still such a gulf in our abilities when I've given my best—it sends chills down my spine. Perhaps you could humor a poor swordsman and his trifles for a bit…?"

"Hmm? Even if I swear I don't want to? Oh heavens, no. Overcoming a nasty trick is just the sort of thing that defines a protagonist; it's what makes him a main character! If my lightning has slowed, then I need simply dig deep into myself and make it faster again! In deference to your fighting spirit, though, I'll spare your head—aaaand *go*!"

Still ready to fight to the finish, Cecils launched himself forward at a speed that would have been incomprehensible to the average observer. Astonishingly, he did indeed seem even faster than before. His sword was a flashing bolt, a silver streak, that took the shortest route to Julius's heart.

But Julius's saber got there first, meeting the blade that meant to pierce his chest.

"Huh?"

"If you're going to be so kind as to underestimate me, I'm more than happy to take any advantage. Your sword is mine."

Cecils watched in amazement as, with a loud *crack*, the katana in his hand shattered. Tossing aside the broken half of his sword, the young man mouthed a silent word of surprise. Cecils was looking at the weapon that had intercepted his katana; Julius's saber was shining with a multicolored light.

"That might be the strangest and most interesting thing I've seen in my life!"

"This is the spirit sword Al Clarista. It's missing a hue, but there's nothing this light cannot cut."

"Wow, that's *so cool*!"

Having successfully shattered his opponent's weapon, Julius pressed his attack against his deeply impressed opponent. If his rainbow strike could inflict even one wound, things would turn considerably in his favor. Cecils, however, had already discarded the bladeless sword and dodged the

incoming attack with a backward flip. The Blue Lightning of Volakia nimbly evaded with his legendary speed. Eyes sparkling, the young man then enthusiastically applauded Julius.

"Bravo, *bravissimo*! Granted, it was only my fifth-best weapon, yet you not only blocked but even destroyed my sword! And to do so with your own special technique! This has gotten me really fired up!

"Cecils. You've been ordered to ensure the safe return of the emperor. What's this about your fifth-best weapon? You know my life is essential to Volakia, as well as your own best interests."

"Ha-ha-ha, pardon me, Your Majesty. My primary and second-best swords were out for sharpening. Honestly, I overslept today, and when I jumped out of bed, that was the one I grabbed…"

Vincent, standing with his arms crossed, only managed to inspire a moderately embarrassed scratch of the cheek from Cecils. Then this most preeminent of the Nine Divine Generals drew his other sword—one with a truly cruel countenance.

"This is my third-best sword; plus, I think I'll take off my sandals to fight this time. How about that?"

"With all that I have said, you still think it wise to speak flippantly to me?"

"You *know* that's how I am, Your Majesty! Besides, when I really get serious, most opponents don't last even a few seconds—heavens, they don't last the blink of an eye. I know it makes for a good show, but as a performer, it's boring. Please let me decide how to strut my hour upon the stage."

A more insolent reply to the leader of an empire could hardly have been imagined. But Vincent, arms still crossed, let the matter pass, only giving an affirming nod. Cecils broadened his smile. "I knew I could count on you, Your Majesty! I knew you'd understand!"

"I must say that when we cross blades, I think your third-best sword will suffer the same fate as your fifth."

"To touch is to be cut. That's true of every blade, be it a saber or a katana. But then it's only a matter of not touching. Of cutting off your wrist before you can block me. You're such a fine-looking opponent, though! I'll try not to mar your appearance too much."

"How considerate of you. Perhaps I might hope for yet more kindness. Let me suggest we retire for today and resume this combat at some time less

fraught for us both…"

"Ah, you're making yourself sound less elegant. You won't talk your way out of this, no matter how pretty your words."

Julius had known it wouldn't work. His opponent's hunger for battle was growing by the minute, and the knight doubted Cecils would let him buy much more time.

Just as he had said, Cecils removed his sandals and stood barefoot on the forest path. If taking off his footwear made him even faster, then Julius was unsure how many more exchanges he could manage. He had played his trump card, used his special move, and yet…

The knight of Lugunica adopted a fighting stance.

"I believe this is my cue," Cecils said, leveling his third-best sword at the purple-haired man.

An instant later, a massive form came sprawling between them, toppling trees as it went.

"Gooonng, gooogogoong!"

This enormous torso was accompanied by a unique cry as it spat up dust and soared through the air. It finally came to rest spread eagle on the forest floor and covered in dirt. In a fit of violent coughing, a gemstone fell loose from their body.

A being cased in natural armor was difficult to forget; it was Mogro Hagane.

"Mogro?! What in the world happened to you? And why did you have to spoil my performance…?" Cecils, miffed, called out to the Steelfolk from somewhere above. Mogro heard him and, turning what seemed likely to be their head, said:

"Ghnr, Cecils, glad you are here. Enemy very strong—Groovy, losing."

"Look, sorry, but *I'm* very busy finishing off *my* prey, and—Wait, did you just say that both you and Groovy are going to be defeated?"

"Yes. Wait, correction. Think we cannot win. That is all."

"Most people would call that being inferior! Huh, huh, huh, you Lugunica folks are really something!" Completely ignoring Mogro's stubborn attempt to maintain their pride, Cecils gave an excited kick of his feet. He kept his sharp eyes trained on where Mogro had come tumbling through the forest. Shortly after, Groovy followed, no less airborne.

"Gah! Bah! Ngha?!" The hyena-man grunted and groaned as he bounced

along the ground, until he was stopped when he slammed against Mogro. Groovy rested his back against the Steelfolk's leg as he unsteadily rose back to his feet.

"Gotta hand it to him; he really packs a punch, damn! That kingdom bastard ain't normal! Is he even human?!"

Cecils, grinning widely, flitted here and there around the wrathful Groovy, pelting him with questions. "My goodness, he really *did* work you over! Tell me, Groovy, tell me: What kind of opponent is he? How badly did he beat you up?! Was it a close call? A total defeat? Did you manage to get in a single blow?"

But Groovy refused to play along; he just kept glaring back through the trees. "Shut yer gab hole, ya battle-crazed loon! He's ours; you just stand there and watch!"

And then, right where Groovy had been looking, a familiar figure emerged…

"Julius, Ferris, are you all right?"

As the man cleared the toppled trees, the pair were sure it was Reinhard. His white royal guard uniform snapped in the wind. Terrifyingly, the red-haired man didn't have a scratch on him worth mentioning. It was clear at a glance that he had taken on two of the Nine Divine Generals at once and completely overpowered them.

Julius's entire body relaxed at Reinhard's appearance. The aura the Sword Saint projected was much the same as that of Cecils and the others. However, mysteriously to Julius, it inspired completely the opposite emotion in him. He gave a slight shake of his hand, trying to work out the last of the pain, and let his stiff face break into a smile.

"You've managed to arrive just before we weren't all right. Ferris can heal my injuries later, I'm sure. Don't worry about me."

"Meowha—?! R-right, let me handle it. Ferri's the best at that sort of thing! I'm not as tough as any of you guys, but I can hold my own when it comes to healing!"

As Julius registered Ferris's panic-tinged response, he saw the rainbow shimmer fade from his saber.

"Just a moment," Cecils said, puffing out his cheeks as he realized his opponent was standing down. "Aren't you being a bit hasty, acting like our battle is over? On the field, a moment's inattention can cost you your life.

Don't you know that?"

"I thank you for the warning. But it would be rather unfair of me to add my strength in this battle. I'll recuse myself."

"…?" Cecils arched an eyebrow in surprise.

With the empire's strongest fighter flummoxed, Julius gestured toward Reinhard—the kingdom's strongest fighter—with his chin and said, "Since you claim to be the protagonist of this drama, your rightful counterpart is Reinhard. For I believe he is the one who deserves the title you claim."

"…Ahh, ha-ha, I see what you're playing at. You think I'll go mad at that little taunt, do you? Ha-ha-ha, please!" Cecils wore a half smile while he spoke.

Vincent, arms still crossed, let out a long, soft sigh. "You may."

"And so I shall! Right, excellent, let's see just how good this newcomer is!" Cecils took the emperor's remark as his cue, striking a fighting stance with his third-best sword and promptly disappearing. He had sounded completely at ease during their banter, but the prowess of The Blue Lightning of Volakia was on full display now. Julius was unable to see even Cecils's ponytail as the general sped forward. The strike, like a bolt from the sky, lashed out at Reinhard's neck with the power of a storm.

"Aw, you must be *joking*…"

"Many pardons. It happened to be right at my feet, so I just decided to use it."

Cecils gazed in amazement at Reinhard, who had just apologized for causing such a surprise. Clutched in the Sword Saint's hand was a katana, or rather, what remained of one. It was Cecils's fifth-best sword, the one Julius had shattered.

"…!"

That single exchange was enough to convey Reinhard's unparalleled strength. Eyes shining, Cecils disappeared again. He went as fast as his namesake, then even faster. Multiple images of the man in the blue kimono began to appear until it seemed as though Reinhard was against an army of a hundred. It was beyond anything Julius's defensive reflexes might have been able to respond to. This surely must have been Cecils's last resort.

But if Cecils at his greatest seemed superhuman, then so did Reinhard. The Sword Saint didn't give an inch of ground, parrying the encroaching attacks with nothing but the hiltless blade of his opponent's own broken

weapon. Reinhard deflected, swept away, and guarded against every strike. With only half a sword, one he had to hold with the tips of his fingers to not cut himself, Reinhard was defending against what was essentially an enchanted sword. Such power was truly something from the realm of nightmares. And if that was how Julius saw it, then how much more did the enemy, the Divine General, think of it?

Yet even in the face of such fearsome strength…

"Think you can keep up with *this*?!" Cecils unleashed a devastating crosswise cut, but there was a tremble in his voice now. Every mode of attack he had tried had been thoroughly rebuked. Maybe it was amazement—or even fear; either would have been appropriate when confronting Reinhard.

But in fact, the quiver in his voice was not from any excess of emotion. It was from facing this thing head-on…

"More…"

"I believe it's about time I counterattack," Reinhard said.

Cecils licked his lips and tensed his waist as he prepared to move even faster. It was only an instant, the blink of an eye in the midst of a thunderstorm, but it wasn't lost on Reinhard. Swiftly, he drew an arc with one long leg, targeting Cecils's slim body. His kick sliced through the air with not only beauty, but enough power to split a tree in half with a single blow.

In a battle of swords, the deliberate choice to use a kick sent a very clear message, and it was right to do so—but to choose it during such a clash of titans was tantamount to foolishness.

"Leaving your dear sword sheathed is going to cost you your life!" Cecils exclaimed. Reinhard had left the Dragon Sword at his hip, and now Cecils's strike came rushing at him. It was a slash designed to catch the incoming kick; even Reinhard couldn't win in a battle of blade against leg. Consequently, he chose to twist his waist and hip, changing the angle of his strike in midair.

"Wha—?!" With a crack like a whip, the foot that had been coming for his chest was suddenly aimed at Cecils's delicate neck.

"…!" The impact robbed the Divine General of consciousness, and the man's eyes rolled back in his head for a moment. The swordsman fell to the ground like a puppet with cut strings.

The empire's strongest fighter made a *thump* as he collapsed. It left the

two remaining members of the Nine Divine Generals speechless. Julius and Ferris were surprised as well, of course. To them, Reinhard's victory had never been in doubt, but the degree to which he had overwhelmed Cecils was still a surprise.

"Pride upon pride… To challenge an opponent without understanding his true strength, and to come out like this… I have had quite enough of theatrics. To be defeated without even a chance to use one's full strength is not in keeping with the principles of the empire." Vincent seemed a man apart, neither openly surprised nor particularly crestfallen. This was despite the fact that his own general—one of his strongest warriors—had just been defeated. The ruler of Volakia's attitude of near boredom hadn't changed. Instead, he turned his attention to his other two generals, still dumbstruck, and said, "And what did the two of you hope to accomplish? Numbers and skill have both failed you. If you insist on expending your lives in this attempt to recover me, I will not stop you, but…"

"Damn it, you don't have to spell it out! Mogro!" Groovy shouted.

"Understood. Acknowledged. Groovy." Mogro secured Cecils, propping him against the Steelfolk's own massive body.

Groovy, scowling, pointed across the woods. "You win this one, ya bastards. But if you harm a hair on His Majesty's head—well, I'll cut you up till that hair is the only thing left! Till even the animals won't eat you!"

"Ferri thinks that makes it sound a lot safer to finish you off right here."

"Yeah? I'd like to see you try, you pointy-eared punk!"

"Please don't. Safer for us. I think so." Mogro tried to calm Groovy's attempt to put up a strong front. The sparks between them were practically visible. But the escapees likewise thought it would be best to walk back Ferris's challenge.

"Groovy, Mogro. Tell that fool to use his first- and second-best swords in any future incidents, and that another defeat will not be tolerated. And next time you show up, act like you know what you're doing. This is of great consequence to me."

"…Yeah, you got it, Your Majesty." Groovy nodded disconsolately at the emperor's parting words. Then Julius and the others fled the field, not dropping their guard. Until the moment they were out of sight, the knights felt the glare of the two conscious Divine Generals at their backs.

11

"…! Where am I?!"

"Oh, Cecils, awake, safe."

The young man in the blue robe got up off the ground as he suddenly found consciousness rushing back to him. He looked around hurriedly to discover a massive, brown wall looking down at him—Mogro Hagane.

Cecils Segmund blinked at his comrade—he never could tell what Mogro was thinking—and tilted his head, wondering what had happened. A lancing pain in his neck was quick to remind him.

Cecils had fought the young, red-haired man, taken him on head-to-head…

"I lost? Me?! *Me*, defeated by that nobody?!"

"Whaddaya mean, 'nobody'? That was Lugunica's Sword Saint."

"Sword Saint? You mean the one said to have cut down a dragon?! He's still alive?!"

"That story, four hundred years old, first Sword Saint. That boy, a descendant. But still, a monster."

Groovy and Mogro shared a moment's annoyance with Cecils's startled misapprehension. But then Groovy nodded, confirming Mogro's stilted words. "Yeah," he said. "Can't believe all of us got hung out to dry, geez. Three of the Volakian Empire's Nine Divine Generals, done in by one nasty little shit!"

"'Done in'…? Oh! Speaking of which, where's His Majesty? What happened to him?! When you said 'safe,' did you mean—?"

"That we completely turned the tables on 'em and got the emperor back? Friggin' hell, don't make me laugh. We had to watch those pricks walk away with him. Was like we weren't even there."

"His Majesty, taken. Knights of the kingdom desire war, truly."

Cecils had looked at his own, quaking hand when he asked to confirm the whereabouts of the absent Vincent. The generals, utterly defeated? A situation as bad as could be imagined? The emperor of Volakia, gone? It was almost too much to take in. This was all because Cecils had failed to match them as an opponent. For the first time in his life, he felt humiliated and powerless. The swordsman ground his teeth in shame. When he'd heard that knights from Lugunica were responsible for Balleroy's murder and the emperor's abduction, he'd been fired up. Cecils had casually assumed that

the incident would give him something to do.

"We have to get His Majesty back immediately. I have to confess, I assumed I would've beaten them easily, but I wasn't thinking hard enough… Do you suppose this is the worst thing that's happened since His Majesty assumed the throne?"

"You just realizin' that now, dung-for-brains?! Listen, the man told us to get the other generals and hunker down in the capital! Goz's in charge now, the old nut!"

"Arrrgh, awful, this is awful, this is the worst thing!" Cecils flailed on the ground, angry over his belated understanding. After a moment's wailing, though, he gave a long, deep sigh. "Phew, nothing like a good bit of yelling to calm yourself down… Now, if there's one major problem, it's that all the soldiers in the imperial army put together couldn't best that red-haired Sword Saint."

"Calm, suddenly. Proof, where?"

"Simple deduction. The imperial army faced *me*, and I cut them to pieces. So if there's a young man who can do roughly what I can do, do you think they stand a chance?"

"——" Mogro duly went silent at that.

Though they had been spoken lightly, Cecils words were true and bore no exaggeration. It was said that he had struck down the equivalent of an army during the Rite of Imperial Selection, but only because that was all the opponents that could been provided at the time. If there had been more of them, he could easily have cut his way through an entire town, the entire capital, an entire country. To a transcendent fighter like himself, the common foot soldier may as well have not existed. And the same was true of the red-haired Sword Saint.

"With the likes of him on their side, it wouldn't matter if we pitched the whole army against them—it wouldn't matter if the whole army joined into one gigantic, united entity. They can't beat him. We must make sure they're told not to engage him, even if he's spotted."

"You sayin' we should tell 'em to just look the other way if they see the guys who kidnapped the emperor?"

"Yes, because they have no other choice. It is not our place to deprive His Majesty of his property, is it?"

Everything in the capital of Volakia was considered a belonging of

Vincent's. That included the city and its resources, of course, but also the life of every soldier, every commoner—all that there was. The Empire of Volakia was a rich land, full of wonderful and beautiful things. Yet Vincent felt that such abundance was no excuse to waste any of it. That was one of his more human qualities.

"Still, to lose to them… Ahh, so this is loss. I'm still alive, though. I've risen from my defeat and have the chance now to seize victory. I see, so that's my new role! I sold you short, my red-haired friend! It seems destiny is on my side."

He was confident that he and the Sword Saint, who stood between him and the emperor, would meet again. For the first time in his twenty years of life, Cecils Segmund had come up against an immovable object. When he had overcome it, then he would know for certain that he was truly favored by destiny.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo… Ha-ha-ha! Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Son of a—Keep it down! I said pipe down, shithead!"

"I can't wait, I can't wait; there's no *reason* to wait. Right, I'm going to go grab a little something I forgot, for when we retrieve His Majesty. Gotta get my possessions back from the smith." Cecils slipped his sandals back on his feet, tapping the toes gently against the ground and smiling.

"Possessions…" Mogro cocked their head curiously.

"Indeed!" Cecils said, nodding vigorously. "My beloved swords, my first- and second-best. Now that I know I'm dealing with the renowned Sword Saint of Lugunica, it would be silly of me not to take him seriously."

He gave another innocent smile, utter joy flickering in his eyes, and his voice trembled just the tiniest bit.

12

Having shaken their Divine General pursuers, Julius and the others emerged safely from the forest. Although Reinhard had eventually forced his way to victory, it remained true that the generals had taken no small amount of time from them. As such, they fully expected to emerge from the woods to find an impenetrable net of soldiers surrounding them, but—

"However my men may feel, the other three will have told them that they are not dealing with opponents mere foot soldiers can handle. Knowing that,

none of those in command would order the wasteful use of soldiers. Though one must admit, it makes for a rather boring escape."

Such was Vincent's understanding of the disposition of his nation's troops. It was a statement from a man who trusted the tactics of his subordinates over the obvious deployment of the entire army to retrieve him. Julius, too, understood this intellectually, but from an emotional perspective, it must have been very trying for the soldiers. To be able to quell such emotions and bend the soldiers to a desired effect—perhaps that was another advantage of the empire's ways.

In any event…

"Looks like we've finally got a chance to breathe." Reinhard slumped his shoulders ever so slightly, though his attention to what was happening on the other side of the closed door remained vigilant. The group found themselves in a small guardhouse somewhere beyond the woods. It sat at the edge of the mountains to the north of the empire. Happily, whoever normally occupied this modest domicile was absent, so there had been no need to explain who they were or what they were doing. Though, it had to be said that the place made a poor substitute for an imperial castle. Reinhard was right; it was only a stopover, a place to catch their breath.

"I would never intentionally take such opponents lightly," the Sword Saint added. "Even so, those people pursuing us are truly a powerful lot… Guess there's no rest for the weary."

"'Truly powerful'…? If even *you* think that, Reinhard, that gives me a meowy, meowy bad feeling about this." Ferris frowned at Reinhard's verdict as the young man leaned back against the door and thought of his earlier fights. Julius, though, was more than half in agreement with Ferris's somewhat sarcastic remark. One would never know that Reinhard had just been through a series of intense battles by looking at him. As he dusted himself off, the Sword Saint only seemed like perhaps he had been sprayed with some dust carried by the wind.

"I'm not used to hearing such things from you, either, Reinhard."

"You too, Julius? It wasn't as easy as it looked. If I'd made one wrong move, I don't know what would have happened. Those three… Especially that last one… The thought of them makes my blood run cold."

There was no false note in his remark, even though he had subdued such a tremendous enemy with a single kick. He was offering heartfelt admiration

for his opponents' strength and skill. Reinhard was one who could sincerely praise the strength of others without hesitation, without showing any pride in his own abilities. That was what made him—

"And what do you plan to do next?" The interruption came from Vincent, who had sat himself in one of the guardhouse's poorly hewn chairs. It was just a crude, wooden thing, yet from the way Vincent occupied the seat, it suddenly appeared to be a storied piece, a legend. The atmosphere felt less like a little shack and more akin to a throne room now—such was what it meant to truly be the ruler of Volakia.

Vincent calmly crossed his long legs and looked at the three dumbstruck knights. "You have procured my person and even evaded several of the Nine Divine Generals. Do you intend to continue sowing chaos and confusion in the empire, using my life as a shield? Or perhaps you wish to destroy my nation."

"If we were clever enough, we might be able to manage it, but then we would wind up on the chopping block, and I'd like to avoid that. If there must be a tragic turn, let it be in the middle of the story, not at the end."

"Hmph. A most erudite way of putting it."

In the final chapter of *The Guillotine of Magrizza*, the protagonist and his coconspirator, his father, the king, were killed on the eponymous guillotine. Julius, however, didn't intend to follow the old precedent quite so literally.

"We'd better be in our best shape, then," Ferris said. "Julius, let me look at your injuries; I'll treat them. You too, Reinhard. Don't worry, I'll be done in a jiffy." He took Julius, who was feeling newly inspired, by the sleeve and sat him in a chair. As instructed, Julius rolled up his shirt to reveal the painful-looking wound on his side, which had been inflicted by Groovy. He also had a seemingly endless collection of cuts from battling Cecils. "Geez… Can't believe you can look so calm with wounds like these…"

"One of the first things you learn as a knight is how to put on a strong facade. At no time must a warrior appear bereft of his confidence and poise. So long as he stands before that which he must protect, his will must remain unbroken."

"Yeah, yeah, very noble and everything… There, that does it for your external wounds." Ferris tended to every one of Julius's injuries, and no sooner did he feel the warmth of the blue glow than all signs of them vanished from his body. He twisted to check the most serious of them, the

injury to his side. There wasn't so much as an ache left.

"That is some skill. Now I can fight to defend you again," Julius exclaimed, complimenting the swiftness and skill of the healing.

"Don't get carried away. I said your *external* injuries. You keep pushing yourself beyond your own limits using those greater spirits, and it's tearing up your insides—that's way more serious."

"I can't hide anything from you," Julius said with a smile.

"You *shouldn't* hide things from your healer." Ferris frowned again. He poked Julius gently in the forehead, where he could interfere with Julius's gate—the nexus of all the mana flowing through his body. The purple-haired knight's pact with the greater spirits allowed him to exceed the capacities of his physical body; this was one of his ace techniques. It was this tactic that had allowed him to cope with Cecils's speed, but the price Julius paid was collected through internal damage to his body, in places that couldn't be seen by the naked eye. Thankfully, Ferris detected even these elusive injuries and was able to treat them.

"You've got to be in top shape, or you won't make a good meat shield for me. Believe me, I'll put you to good use… What's with the look, Your Majesty?"

"Mm, I was simply wondering why a beast-person who can't even use a sword would be granted the livery of a knight. I was also somewhat surprised to discover you are more than a mere decoration. It seems all three of you have your skills. Therein lies the hope of victory."

"Your Majesty," Julius said, turning toward Vincent. He had his doubts, but he thought it was time for a serious talk. "I think we can expect not to be interrupted now. I would be pleased to know what Your Majesty is thinking. You've acted cool toward the Divine Generals, who are ostensibly out to rescue you, while cooperating with us in our flight… I, for one, believe you are fully aware by now of what is actually happening."

"Insofar as it is within my knowledge, yes. Some of my predecessors have been vain enough to believe they could bend the entire world to their will, but I am not quite so prideful as that. Nor am I deluded into believing the entire world is somehow under my control. There are things I do know, and things I *can* know, and that is all."

"You have an awfully roundabout way of talking, Your Majesty," Ferris said, tilting his head. "What is it you're saying?"

“I believe the emperor’s telling us that the way he understands the situation, it is better for him cooperate with us. Sound about right, sire?” Reinhard asked, summarizing.

Vincent nodded placidly and crossed his arms, provoking a squeak of protest from the ancient chair. “Are you people of Lugunica familiar with the traditional commandment of Volakia?”

“The Imperial Way…,” Julius said. “The teaching that citizens should be strong. I will resist the urge to give any personal comment on that ideal, but it certainly seems to be a crucial aspect of the empire’s current successes.”

“So it is. And the accompanying admonishments apply to everyone in Volakia, the emperor included. All position and all honor are gained through power, and through power can they be taken away.”

Julius and the others arched a collective eyebrow to hear Vincent describe the imperial system. Why was he explaining the empire’s way of life to them now? Soon enough, however, they worked it out.

“You think someone’s trying to start a rebellion in hopes of gaining the throne?”

“A fine guess, beast-boy. In other circumstances, one might suspect a foreign assassin. However, things are different in the empire. For those of us who live here, it is far more common to find our lives sought by those closest at hand.”

Ferris was incredulous. “B-but even if you were assassinated, and the throne wound up empty, there’s no guarantee the plotter would be the one to fill it. Would anyone accept a ruler who came to power like that?”

“You’re wrong about that, Ferris,” Julius replied. “You’re thinking like you’re still in Lugunica… What you’ve described is exactly how things work here.” Ferris frowned at this, but neither Reinhard nor—most importantly of all—Vincent Volakia contradicted him.

“Precisely. It would be tolerated, even embraced. Each must prove their worth through strength. That applies to the throne as much as it does to everything else.”

“In fact, if you think about the Rite of Imperial Selection, the throne seems to be the paragon.”

In Volakia, the seat of power went to the survivor of a rite characterized by bloodshed, with the sons and daughters of the last emperor murdering one another until the sole survivor took the seat of sovereignty. This made the

emperor a symbol of strength.

"Unreal…" Ferris practically whispered the word and then fell silent.

"…In any case, we understand that whoever is seeking Your Majesty's life is probably someone within the empire. But then what explains Master Balleroy's death? What did he have to do with assassinating you?"

"One could conceive any number of possibilities. Perhaps Balleroy became aware of the conspirators' plans, or perhaps their hope was to eliminate one of my pawns. Although, he was the lowest of the Nine Divine Generals. If it were meant as a blow to my strength, his death has not proven very effective in that regard. Such an objective would mean these conspirators are not aiming very high."

"They did worse than that—after what happened to Master Balleroy, the Crystal Palace was in an uproar. It only served to raise Your Majesty's suspicions and make it harder to get at their target."

For that matter, was there even an advantage to doing all this while the emissaries from Lugunica were present? Having visitors from another nation around would only mean the castle would be on even higher alert than usual. Knowing that, why would anyone have…?

"It would certainly be difficult to fathom *if* my head were their only objective. But what if one added the situation you all now find yourselves in to the calculations? Then their true goal begins to become clear."

"Our situation…?" Julius fell silent for a moment. Then he pulled his lovely eyebrows into a frown as his thoughts struck upon an outrageous possibility. He met the emperor's eyes with his own. "Your Majesty, are you suggesting that your enemies want to start a war between Volakia and Lugunica?"

As it appeared to most people, knights from Lugunica had murdered one of the Divine Generals and subsequently absconded with the emperor. As they had been made painfully aware so many times before, one small wrong move could easily bring the two nations to war. If that was indeed the true aim of those seeking Vincent's life…

"It would be the sort of accomplishment that would make one appear worthy of the throne. A hasty notion, perhaps, but a potentially effective one with Lugunica bereft of the Dragon's protection. There have been no small number of those advocating an attack on the kingdom the moment its covenant with the Dragon became anything less than certain."

Julius gritted his teeth at the emperor's words. If there was war now, it would produce casualties of untold numbers. To even consider setting in motion such a course of events was unforgivable.

"If those responsible make Balleroy's death look like your doing, and if they manage to eliminate me as well, then war becomes inevitable. It doesn't appear the Divine Generals are involved yet, but we must imagine these betrayers will assume we would figure out this much. It would appear the three of you are bound to commit your lives to the protection of the imperial personage."

"What a nasty smile…"

Despite the clear and present threat to his life, Vincent had grinned as if he were in high spirits. Julius didn't bother to reprimand Ferris for his sour whisper. Indeed, he himself felt like exclaiming that this was akin to some cruel joke. Julius and his friends, who had sworn their swords to the Kingdom of Lugunica, now fighting to defend the emperor of Volakia—who could have imagined such a day would come?

"If all this is true, though, then Master Balleroy was targeted as a catalyst to start this war. Surely, anyone could have served the same purpose?"

"Yes, if they were of the appropriate station. One of the Nine Divine Generals—a man who could stand on his own feet while not holding much influence, either. A perfect target, unfortunately for him."

"I… I see," Julius said, looking at the ground, discouraged. He had exchanged only a few words with Balleroy, but the man seemed a true soldier, and it wasn't hard to imagine how much hard training he must have done to become who he was. Worse, after working his way up through the murderous hierarchy of the empire, even securing a position among the Nine Divine Generals, he was felled by an ambush. It was almost…

"…Unnatural," muttered the purple-haired knight.

"Julius?"

The man put a hand to his chin and let his thoughts roam. Even as he lamented Balleroy's death, he mentally put himself back in the huge chamber where the man had met his end. Something felt wrong. In hopes of putting his finger on exactly what it was, he decided to reconfirm the sequence of events.

"Reinhard. After you arrived in that large room, just before Master Balleroy was killed, you said your time was stolen. Isn't that right?"

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s mysterious to me why I couldn’t save Master Balleroy. I’m pretty confused, because even I don’t really remember what happened…”

“Don’t worry, I’m not blaming you. It just doesn’t make sense. Why didn’t our enemies, whoever they are, go after you instead, Reinhard?”

“…? I’d guess it was because my death alone wouldn’t have been enough? If they wanted to start a war, only the death of Emperor Vincent would suffice…”

“In which case, they could simply kill you and Master Balleroy both and weaken the two sides in a single stroke. If there really is war between our nations, you yourself are going to become more important, not less.”

In extreme terms, Reinhard was as much of a deterrent to war as the Dragon itself. Julius assumed he wasn’t the only one who thought so. Surely, Ferris, at least, agreed with him. Indeed, the Sword Saint alone might’ve been enough to bring any war to a close. In which case…

“There must have been some reason they could only target Master Balleroy.”

“You think war between Lugunica and Volakia wasn’t their only plan? Why would they only kill one of their own…?”

“No. No, that isn’t the way it is. Ah, perhaps I’ve had this backward.”

Ferris was confused by Julius’s speculation, but Vincent grasped the implications immediately. A thin smile crept across the ruler of Volakia’s face, and his black eyes drilled into Julius. The young man frowned, a chill creeping down his spine, but he returned the piercing look.

“Tell me, then. By your reasoning, to what end did these brigands attack Balleroy and not your Sword Saint? What purpose did they have in leading our countries toward war while leaving the Sword Saint alive?”

“Well, I think…” Julius felt his tongue go dry as he began to answer; he swallowed once. Then, feeling Reinhard and Ferris at his back, he gave Vincent his answer—his explanation for why Balleroy, and not Reinhard, had been felled.

“The death of Balleroy Temeglyph, one of the Nine Divine Generals, was part of their plan all along.”

A quiet chaos reigned in Lupghana, capital of the Volakian Empire. The emperor had been kidnapped, and one of the renowned Nine Divine Generals lay dead. Such events were unprecedented, to say the least.

In an elaborate chamber far from the Crystal Palace, several figures held a secret conference.

"The emperor's a sharp one—I think we have t' assume he's noticed by now."

"——" There was no answer.

"Startin' to wish we'd finished him off at the castle? In the capital, with enough troops, we might've had a shot, but… Well, well."

"I've had quite enough of your griping, Temeglyph…!"

A tall, slim figure had been speaking before they were cut off. The voice belonged to an attractive man who ran a hand through his dirty-brown hair, his almond-shaped eyes drooping. It was none other than the one believed to have died within the Crystal Palace, he whose untimely end had moved so many soldiers to prepare for battle.

There stood Balleroy Temeglyph, alive and well.

Another figure, the one who had interrupted, pointed a quaking finger at Balleroy. "This is all because you couldn't resist embellishing things! What have we done that we deserve to be led on a wild-goose chase in our own country by a bunch of outlanders?"

"Force can only get ya so far. Can't stab someone in the back when you're comin' at him from the front, can ya? As for the outlanders, color me impressed that they've given us so much trouble. Raisin' so much hell in a foreign country—they must be better than we thought."

"For an entire group of Divine Generals to be roundly defeated is a disgrace to the nation. If Eight-Arms were still alive, we would never have suffered such an affront."

"That name's real nostalgic and all, but he's dead as dirt." Balleroy shrugged at the man's rueful tone. To hear the name of Volakia's old hero after this litany of complaints was enough to bring a tear to his eye. "Anyway, time to stop lookin' to the past. *He* ain't fit enough. And Eight-Arms, well, he didn't give himself the finest send-off. Am I wrong?"

There was no response.

"He was supposed to defend the capital, but instead, he betrayed the city to one of the Archbishops of the Seven Deadly Sins and then got himself

killed in the fighting… As legendary heroes go, it wasn't much of an ending."

The other man clenched his fist at Balleroy's less than reverent words, then sighed deeply. "…The emperor must not return to the Crystal Palace."

"Y' can just leave that to my own personal guard. Most of the men won't even get near that li'l group—Master Goz's orders, see. If we can finish 'em off in the meantime, it's our game. Even if they get away from us, eh, so long as we keep Lugunica's knights quiet, there won't be anyone t' question us."

"Question us? Now who's playing the upstart? You and I are rebels against His Majesty the Emperor of Volakia. Don't be so naive as to think you can still escape as you please."

"Ha-ha-ha, that was just a joke there. Empire humor. I've spent long enough with His Majesty t' know that if you gamble and lose, you don't live long enough to do it again."

Balleroy had toiled hard as one of the Nine Divine Generals, all under the banner of Vincent Volakia. He didn't have any illusions about receiving any mercy from the relentless ruler. The man was cold and cruel, smart and violent, but was one worthy of claiming dominion over others.

"Gotta say, I feel bad for His Majesty."

They couldn't know who would be sitting on the throne when all was said and done. He had no personal hatred for Vincent. In fact, there was reason to be grateful to him. There had been no real cause for Balleroy to question his loyalty, either. Did that mean, then, that the person he now plotted with commanded more commitment and trust from him than even the emperor? Not really. This was simply the logical conclusion of Balleroy's ideals, of what was in his heart. The emperor *he* knew wouldn't condemn hostility born of such a reason but would instead nod with understanding. After that, it was merely a question of which of their personal philosophies would prevail.

"Right, okay, let's get to gettin'. Figurin' out where he is now… You and I both know that's what'll settle this fight."

"I certainly do!" The other man, incensed, pounded the table with his fist. Then he took the conversation mirror from his table and pointed off somewhere, giving instructions for battle formations. Though he was not on par with any of the Divine Generals, this man projected more than enough of a menacing presence. It was this very reason that Balleroy had chosen him as his coconspirator in this rebellion. His combination of ambition and authority was perfect.

“Welp, s’pose I’d best get moving myself,” the traitorous general decided. Balleroy picked up the spear leaning against the wall and began to slowly make his departure.

“Where do you think you’re going, Balleroy?”

“Not feelin’ so numb anymore, so I think I’ll get some air.” He waved to his coconspirator without halting his stride. The slight twist of his lips could have been taken for self-mockery, but he didn’t feel like letting the other man see it.

“Don’t even think about making any decisions on your own.”

“On my own?” Balleroy answered quietly. “Don’t be silly. If I wanted to just sit around, I never woulda talked to you.”

“…!” The tone was so restrained, yet the other man felt his throat tighten with fear. Balleroy realized he had accidentally let a bit of his bloodlust slip into his words. Still, he didn’t apologize for it, choosing to just leave the building. He was greeted by the welcoming cry of his mount. The quality of his smile changed when he heard the familiar call of his friend, and Balleroy looked up with a sincere grin.

After a long moment, he spoke.

“How about we get going, Carillon? Do what we’re really here to do, eh?”

14

At the foot of a broad mountain range, located some handful of miles north of the Crystal Palace, several fugitives were looking one another over inside a guardhouse bereft of its usual occupants.

Reinhard and Ferris shared a glance while Julius explained his hypothesis on what had really happened in the palace earlier that day.

“What if Master Balleroy faked his own death…? Could he be in league with the conspirators?”

“If the death of one of the Divine Generals was the best way to put things in motion, then the simplest solution would be to enlist one of the Nine as an ally. Backstabbings and ambushes by one’s friends are akin to daily bread among those of the empire. It is unwise to turn your back without proper caution. Striking the spark of rebellion is no small feat, either.”

“So then the best move is to make the general who’s supposed to ‘die’

your ally from the start? But that…"

"It is an eminently plausible tactic. If the crime could be pinned on you all, then so much the better. The rest of the generals would take it upon themselves to wipe you out. All the more so if you happened to kill me somewhere in the process."

If it turned out that knights from Lugunica had killed both a Divine General and Emperor Vincent, they'd set the entirety of the empire against the apparent criminals. Even now, they teetered on the brink of just such a development. Should their enemies create the right conditions, then the conspirators themselves had no need to do anything more. They could count on the pursuing generals to silence the interlopers. However…

"There were two things they didn't count on. One was that His Majesty wasn't killed back at the palace…"

"And the other, that your Sword Saint would be a match even for Cecils."

"…You mean to say that Reinhard really threw a wrench in their plans?" Ferris asked, and Julius nodded with no small degree of pride. If Reinhard hadn't been there, Vincent might very well have lost his head to an assassin. Julius and Ferris would have certainly been destroyed by the pursuing generals, too. It was thanks to Reinhard that those events had not come to pass, and that there was still a ray of hope for peace between the kingdom and the empire.

"We've got a lot of the pieces now. What we have to do is get His Majesty back to the Crystal Palace and reveal the true identity of our enemies. That's going to take some careful planning. Not many people would be capable of it."

"Agreed," Vincent said. "But first, let me spare a word of praise for you. Well done."

"Yeah, way to go, Julius," Reinhard added. "Ferris and I would never have figured all that out."

Julius felt it was all a little much—but by having simplified the situation, he had also thrown the difficulties into sharp relief. Now that they knew exactly what their victory conditions were, they knew their enemies would be desperate to stop them. Balleroy Temeglyph was among those enemies. The three knights would need everything they had to—

"Ah. I knew it wouldn't be so easy." Julius looked around, ever alert.

"Oh, for the love of—! Talk about not being able to catch your breath!"

Ferris groaned.

Now that they understood victory would require getting Vincent back to the palace, they had emerged from the guardhouse. Unfortunately, the group promptly stopped dead in their tracks when they sensed they were surrounded by innumerable hostile presences.

"So many of them. I can't believe I didn't notice… They really caught us with our pants down." Reinhard, like Julius, scanned the area, frowning to realize they'd been taken completely unawares. This look of chagrin was unusual for him, but his frustration with himself was understandable. They were encircled by so many; it should have been impossible not to notice them.

"Ten, twenty… No less than fifty, I'd say."

"Wow, that's not good news. I didn't know your Sprouts could count, Julius."

"For better or worse, they're excellent students, and I'm a proud teacher."

"Hmm, not the brag I was hoping for…"

Ferris quickly hid himself behind Julius and Reinhard. When Julius had his greater spirits confirm the number of auras surrounding the guardhouse, he discovered it was many tens of times their own. They were not Volakian troops, however. Rather, Julius was certain these were assassins sent by whosoever was hunting them. The killers seemed to meld with the trees, preventing the spirit mage from getting a good look at them. Even if he strained his eyes, following the guidance of his spirits, he still couldn't seem to make anything out.

"It would seem even the vaunted Sword Saint can't elude the empire's prized hunting hounds."

"Are you implying you know who they are, Your Majesty?" Ferris said. "Maybe you could give them a good shouting-at, then? We share the same fate *meow*, it looks like."

"I very much doubt it. If they've allied themselves with the rebels, then they won't care whether I personally approve of what they're doing. It's obvious enough from the way they've thrown aside their role as spies and informants to turn into simple assassins." Vincent crossed his arms and remained suitably imperious as he eyed the auras around them. "One supposes you were talked into it with sweet nothings. What were you told? That when I had been removed from the throne, the treatment of the weakest

tribe would change? You were bought at a cheap price."

"Um, Your Majesty… If talking to them won't work, maybe we could at least…not taunt them and make them angry? Just Ferri's little idea."

Vincent's provocation had certainly seemed to enhance the menacing pressure that surrounded them. These faceless assassins had come to murder the emperor, he who ruled their nation. With Vincent's words, the last vestiges of hesitation had been wiped from their minds.

Suddenly, they heard a grating, clicking noise.

"This sound…"

"The indication that their preparations are complete. These are frightening and powerful opponents. Show me how you'll protect the ruler of Volakia."

"As you command."

"I'm meowy uncomfortable with this!" Ferris exclaimed. He was the last of the four of them to speak, for it was then the enemy made their move.

With incredible speed, someone approached the guardhouse from behind —a figure flying on wings made of stretched skin. It had legs and arms like a human, but also several crucial differences. The wings were one of them, as were the feelers and compound eyes. All these differences shared a kind of similarity: They were all parts of a bug.

"They are from the Insect Cage Clan. They've domesticated these fearsome bugs. They may not be much to look at, but they are more than powerful enough. Even compared with a Sword Saint."

"Understood," Reinhard said as the enemy closed in.

The Insect Cage Clan was a minority group that existed only in Volakia, a tribe that included a wide variety of demi-humans. From a young age, members of the clan ingested bugs with special powers, adopting the qualities of those creatures over time. They shared their Odo, the wellspring of all life, with the insects, combining their very souls in order to share their bodies and gain the insects' power. This was what led to their monstrous external appearance. When the people of this clan unleashed the power of the insects, they themselves transformed into something very much like the bugs.

"____"

The attacks were very mechanical, holding no passion or emotion. The clansfolk were hunting powerful humans, and they were doing it logically, cruelly, and mercilessly. They danced through the sky on their wings, shot poison darts from the pipes in their mouths, used their mutated arms like

sickles to slash at their prey, stabbed with horns that could punch through steel, and even charged headlong, relying on their own bodies, encased in impenetrable carapaces. All unique moves that no normal person could perform, and yet…

"Well, well. I've never seen any of these attacks before. I guess it would be impolite to describe this as 'very interesting.'"

"…?!"

To the assassins, it must have been like a nightmare, for all their attacks were denied. Reinhard used his fancy footwork to keep them all at a distance, despite their flight advantage. The Sword Saint slapped their poison darts down in midair. With his hands, he deflected their wind-slicing sickles and their armor-piercing horns, while he met their shattering charges and sent them reeling with a single kick. Reinhard had never seen any of these attacks before, yet he wasn't so much as dirtied by them.

"Impossible…," groaned one man with horns growing from his shoulders. His attempt on the emperor's life had been stopped cold. The bug-like assassin's voice trembled in astonishment as he watched Reinhard. "These are our most secret and deadly techniques, yet you treat them as nothing… How?!"

"I'm sorry. I'm just going on intuition."

"Wha…?!" The man's face stiffened in further disbelief. The next moment, Reinhard pulled close two opponents he had grabbed hold of and sent them crashing into the man with the huge sickles and horns.

An enemy with poisonous feelers tried to take the opportunity to get behind Reinhard, but a saber flashed out and sliced the deadly protrusions in half.

"Reinhard, that explanation was not very helpful." Poison scattered from the tumbling bits of feeler; Julius brushed it aside with the wind he whipped out from a swipe of his saber, then stabbed the reeling assassin through the limbs. The man crumpled and fell. Julius slammed him in the face with the hilt of his sword, sending the insect-person into unconsciousness.

Having subdued this one opponent, Julius turned to discover that in the meantime, Reinhard had taken on another five of the Insect Cage Clan killers and overpowered them all.

The red-haired knight had described the ability that allowed him to deal so easily with the clan's unfamiliar attacks as simple intuition, but that was

too modest a term for the first-sight blessing. It allowed Reinhard to understand instinctively how to react so as to defend himself from attacks he was seeing for the very first time. In a word, it was almost like seeing an attack before it happened. The blessing was useless if one was unable to react to an attack that was perceived, but Reinhard's physical abilities were such that there was no attack he couldn't respond to. And then there was…

"The twice-seen blessing…"

When an arm-sickle came at him again, he evaded it easily, even though it came from his blind spot. This was the effect of the twice-seen blessing, which allowed him to respond with vastly greater speed to an attack he had encountered once before. These two skills made it impossible to harm Reinhard either with a new attack or a repeated one. Few opponents could have been a better match for the Insect Cage Clan, a group that prided themselves on the strength of their attacks. Had the Sword Saint not been with them, how long could Julius and the others have held out?

"That is rather astonishing…," Vincent murmured as he watched the scene unfold before him. Reinhard's knifehand, which could cut more effectively than live steel, slashed through the oncoming clan members as they flew at him one after another. To the emperor, perhaps the Sword Saint's combative dance, along with his red hair, painted a scene of moths tragically charging toward a flame.

Still, the enemy was a plentiful swarm. Numbers would tell eventually.

"Julius! Take Ferris and His Majesty!" Reinhard shouted as he continued to turn back the storm of deadly attacks. It was clear he intended to be the rearguard again.

"Rather inelegant, but unavoidable," Vincent remarked.

Destroying the enemy was not their victory condition. Julius knew what he had to do. "Your Majesty, this way!"

"So I shall be made to run again. You know no fear of your betters, do you?"

"Don't complain! Ferri and Julius are running, too!"

Thus, the flight back to the Crystal Palace began in earnest, with Vincent in tow. There was a furious beating of wings; most of the Insect Cage Clan were stalled by Reinhard and couldn't pursue them. A few, though, were able to give chase through the skies.

"Ire! Alo!" Julius gave a sweep of his sword, summoning the red and the

green great spirits. A howling conflagration spun up. It burned the wings from their pursuers, who fell to the ground, screaming.

"Hrgh… Grr…" Even on the ground, the Insect Cage Clan members struggled and tried vainly to reach for their target. Julius ignored them, however. The knight ran to catch up with Ferris and the emperor, who were ahead of him.

"____"

Julius couldn't help feeling some sympathy for the assassins as they stretched and strained to continue their pursuit. If what Vincent had said was true, then these creatures had joined in the rebellion in hopes of gaining higher status for their people. He didn't agree with their methods, but it wasn't his to say that their wish, which had moved them to such actions, was wrong.

"Would you let that cheap sentiment lure you into allowing them to achieve their goals?"

"Your Majesty…"

Vincent had matched his pace to Julius's and looked over at him. When the ruler of Volakia saw the effect his words had, he coldly stated, "You cannot. That is the truth. Mercy, compassion, decency—all are but ways the strong show their superiority over the weak. Chivalry seeks to dress this fact up as something more, but when all is said and done, it only shows that true selflessness is impossible."

Vincent's words were like a merciless blade cleaving Julius's sympathetic heart. However, the knight didn't dispute the emperor's description of his feelings as *cheap sentiment*. He couldn't.

"Your Majesty… Take it easy on Julius, all right?" It was not Julius, but Ferris, now bringing up the rear, who spoke up. His breath was starting to come in gasps, but his gaze was still intense as he leveled it at Vincent. "You might think Julius is a big, serious guy—it's an easy meowstake to make. But inside, he's just a kid, and getting him all bent out of shape with the way you talk makes you nothing but a bully."

"As you proved in the throne room, you certainly do not hesitate to criticize me, beast-boy. Perhaps it only emphasizes that you truly are feral. Did you leave your courtesy behind when you left your mother's womb?"

"I was most humbly spoiled, if you will, *sire*, by one who was not so easily offended by blunt statements. By no stretch was our king in the

slightest way suited to rulership, and yet, Your Majesty…he was a better man than you'll ever be."

It was a provocation far graver than the one offered by Bordeaux in the throne room, and that had almost cost the old man his head. Yet Vincent only narrowed his eyes at Ferris's words. Then he broke into a slight smile. "Let it not be said you are without courage. You've provoked me to draw my attention away from your friend."

"…How's that, sir? Poor li'l Ferri doesn't know what you mean!" Ferris put a finger to his cheek and pretended not to understand what the emperor was saying. That alone revealed the true intention behind Ferris's baiting remark—he had been trying to protect Julius. Had his move been strategically clever or simply one born of friendship? One could be certain it was the latter.

"Ferris, my thanks," Julius said.

"I told *mew*! I don't know what mew're talking about! Listen to me!" Ferris puffed out his cheeks in mock annoyance. Although, he had to unpuff them quite quickly so he could grab another breath as the trio continued their flight.

Julius, one eye on Ferris, chose to throw away any concerns about what they had left behind and focus ahead. At this point, they had to keep moving forward.

"We have to make it to the Crystal Palace…"

The group would have to cross through the forest again to reach the castle, but the structure was already visible in the distance. If they proved able to clear the palace walls by riding the wind, it would be simple to evade the eyes of the imperial troops.

However, as Julius considered the plan, something unexpected happened…

"____"

The knight's naive strategy was cleaved apart—rather like Vincent's right arm, which came flying off at the shoulder.

15

"____"

The emperor's slim arm went spiraling through the air. It landed on the grass at about the same time as Vincent himself, who was knocked to the ground by the shock of it all. It was a moment later before the wound began to gush blood, soaking the emperor's red-and-black outfit.

"Your Majesty!" After the instant it took for his thoughts to stop and restart again, Julius pulled the emperor up. Ferris, his face pale, collected Vincent's arm and quickly began working a healing spell. But this was neither the time nor the place for the cat-boy's recovery magic. "Ferris! We have to get back to the woods! There's nothing to hide behind here!"

"Wha—? Huh? *Hwah?*"

"We don't know how His Majesty is being attacked! I don't see anyone! It must be someone striking from a distance!" Julius spun on his heel and, just as he had told Ferris, made a dash for the woods. Ferris followed after, but without keeping his head down; the situation still had not sunk in for him.

An attack of some kind grazed his cat ears, slamming into the trees beyond. Whatever it was punched clear through the trunk of the first tree, as well as the one behind it. It was then that Ferris finally understood what was happening.

"A sniper?!" cried the demi-human. As if in affirmation, several more trees cracked under fresh impacts.

The blow that had claimed the emperor of Volakia's arm was a long-range, covert magical attack. The assassin had likely been positioned to watch over the route back to the Crystal Palace, and when the fugitives had so readily shown themselves, the killer had taken a shot. Whoever it was, they were careful and attentive, and their accuracy was alarmingly good. If they had aimed just an inch or two higher, it would have been Vincent's head they blew off.

"They don't even seem to care if we go in the woods…!"

"That's because they no longer need to be subtle. And all those shots… How many of them are there?"

Ferris gripped his head as he ran; Julius held the emperor. Sniper shots followed them like a curtain of rain. From right to left, they came with frightening speed and precision; Julius had minimized his movements when dodging to avoid throwing Vincent around too much. The emperor was pale —and unconscious from the shock of losing an appendage. If they didn't stop the bleeding, the man would die. Julius had to make a choice, and soon.

“Ferris! Take shelter under a tree and tend to His Majesty! I’ll keep those assassins busy!”

“You think you can do it?”

“I have to! The emperor’s life is what determines whether it’s peace or war for us!”

“…! All right…!” Ferris trembled for a moment at the weight of this responsibility but nodded. Julius set Vincent in the shadow of an especially large tree, and Ferris began treatment immediately. Presently, he had the severed arm reattached and had moved on to lifesaving measures. The demi-human was a healer among healers, able to reverse the course of even a mortal wound so long as he began to work on it before the victim died. This was Ferris’s—Felix Argyle’s—battlefield. Meanwhile, Julius Juukulius charged toward his own fight.

“Ire, Qua, Alo, Ake, Ine, Ness. My Sprouts, lend me your strength,” Julius whispered, drawing his saber and holding it proudly before him. Six differently colored lights danced about the weapon. Each one only emitted a faint glow. But under the canopy of the forest, which blocked out the sun, they seemed blindingly radiant and beautiful. Six elements, six greater spirits, all granting the knight their power—this was the true strength of the Spirit Knight.

“Go get ’em!” Ferris cried, and Julius made for the clash with the wind at his heels. Sniper shots tore up the earth mere hairs behind the man as he sped across the difficult forest terrain. The enemy was highly capable, but it wasn’t enough to stop Julius. Perhaps they knew he was the greatest threat, though, because the incoming shots quickly shifted to target to him. Even as he evaded blasts from all four directions, Julius was relieved to know he had gotten the attention of the snipers. Now Ferris would be free to do his healing work. All that remained was for Julius to play his part.

“…!”

Shots grazed his cheek and the soles of his feet, allowing the knight to see that the attacks were colorless globes of light. The projectiles were simple spheres of mana, not imbued with any element. That made them akin to the non-elemental attack of Groovy’s magic knuckles. However, these marksmen proved much more refined than that, aiming specifically for Julius’s hands, feet, and vital organs with almost unbelievable precision. Their speed was far greater than that of a heavy bow, and the sniper’s ability to target a

moving enemy seemed almost inhuman. The notion floated into Julius's thoughts that this assassin might be another of the Nine Divine Generals. They were Volakia's most capable fighters, after all. If so, then at this moment, there was only one person who would deliberately take aim at His Majesty…

"Balleroy Temeglyph!"

The man was not testing Julius's skills or trying merely to incapacitate him. The knight of Lugunica was involved in a genuine duel with one of the Nine. Picturing himself in a sort of joust against one of the empire's best fighters, Julius felt his heart tremble. Would his own abilities prove enough for such an opponent?

"____"

Julius was said to be the third strongest of the Knights of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Though he was ranked just after Reinhard and Marcus when it came to strength, the purple-haired man was all too aware of just what a distant third place it was. His abilities were still growing, and Julius didn't know how well he could match one of Volakia's strongest. Thus, whether he quaked with excitement or terror, neither could be certain. However, there was one thing Julius was certain of.

"This arm of mine, gripping this sword. It burns in this moment." He felt the weight he bore, and he knew the awe in which he held his enemy. At times, he doubted his own skill with the saber and whether he had really earned the title he had been given.

This battle would doubtlessly reveal the answer, or at least, the hint of one.

"…!"

Julius emerged from behind a cover of dense trees within the forest. The moment he did, his very flesh reacted to the hail of the invisible light-missiles with the physical enhancement gifted to him by Ine, the light-element greater spirit. It was the same card he had played in his battle with Cecils, one that substantially improved Julius's reactions. The moment his heightened senses detected an attack, he would bring up his sword to block it at the speed of thought.

He sent the globes of light flying away with swift, small motions of his flame-wreathed saber. Julius parried one, then another, and yet another.

"____"

As he blocked each of the incoming shots—though only just—the knight tried to reach out with his feelings to determine the location of the sniper. Once Julius emerged from the woods, he would be in a wide-open plain. There would be no appreciable obstacles until the walls of the capital; he'd be a sitting duck.

But the sniper wouldn't be the only one who'd benefit from the better lines of sight. It would also leave the assassin's own location more obvious to his target. If Julius could just discover the sniper's location, it would allow him to retaliate with his own magic. Thus, the knight of Lugunica made a choice. He would relinquish the initiative but still move to the plain, knowing he would be on the back foot. Whether the strategy would be for good or for ill, Julius would discover if he survived his opponent's opening gambit…

"Not bad, not bad. But it only works if yer enemy is at the same height as you."

Julius thought he heard these words drifting on the wind as he emerged onto the grasslands. However, there was no time to waste on the voice. For the same instant it reached him, so did several sniper shots, each from a different location, and it took everything Julius had to defend against them.

"Impossible…"

By exercising the limits of his swordsmanship and magic, he was able to deflect most of the globes of light that came at him. A few shots he couldn't protect against had managed to graze his left shoulder, right leg, and thigh. Yet Julius felt more surprised than pained. He no longer doubted that Balleroy was the sniper. Even so, Julius believed there had to be more than one shooter. When one considered the shots taken at the emperor, and now at himself, there was little doubt. Otherwise, how could the projectiles have come from so many directions at once?

However…

"I can't imagine there are very many people alive who are capable of such precise shooting." The entire volley had come at Julius in the space of a breath. That there was a group of people around who could launch a barrage not only with great strength and accuracy, but also maintain such incredible coordination, was unthinkable.

The only conclusion was that Balleroy had some sort of trick up his sleeve.

“I have to figure out what it is, or I’ll never reach him.”

Attacks of tremendous aim came too fast for the knight to catch his breath. Their many directions meant he couldn’t determine the sniper’s location, either. Julius adjusted the grip on his sword, fingers trembling, and prepared to meet this hunter’s incredibly honed technique.

He reminded himself that on his unsteady shoulders rode the fates of a kingdom and an empire.

16

Reinhard was holding up the insect assassins, and Julius had gone to confront whoever had been shooting. In the woods, hidden beneath the shadow of a great tree, Ferris could do little more than put his trust in the fighting skills of his two companions while pouring his own efforts into healing the mortally wounded Vincent, who lay before him.

The emperor had lost his right arm and hemorrhaged a great deal of blood before Ferris had been able to begin treatment. Ferris had succeeded in reattaching the arm, but even his prodigious abilities could not restore the emperor’s lost blood or drained vitality. Instead, Ferris fanned the guttering flame of Vincent’s life by exciting the emperor’s water mana, a tactic that involved leaning on the human body’s ability to heal itself.

“I’m begging you, don’t die! It would be the stupidest thing to end up in a war because of *this*…!”

“…Don’t shout directly into my ear. O more-feral-than-ordinary beast of a person.”

“…Look at you—finally awake, and the first thing you say is something nasty.” Ferris had been utterly taken aback by the Volakian ruler’s sudden remark. Vincent was on death’s doorstep, his stamina nearly exhausted. Yet somehow, he had clawed his way back to consciousness. Apparently, the demi-human healer didn’t have to worry about Vincent simply giving in to despair. If one was of frail heart, it could be reflected in the body. Ferris knew from experience that life gave its light only to those who wished for its flame to keep burning.

Emperor Vincent, his face pale, smirked at the obvious relief in the cat-boy’s expression. “It seems your fears are much alleviated. If I am to depart this mortal coil, war between the empire and the kingdom will become

unavoidable. A heavy burden for your narrow shoulders, no doubt."

"Uh-huh, very much so, so again, please don't die, Your Majesty. It would be a stupid way to start a stupid war."

"You feel war is stupid?" Vincent's cold, bloodless smile didn't change at Ferris's remark. In the emperor's dark eyes was the reflection of the young knight, who hadn't even bothered to try wiping away the blood that spattered on the Volakian ruler. "This must vex you greatly. Were Lugunica's royal family well, and the covenant with the Dragon safely in place, you would have no need to save this life of ours."

"____"

"Your healing abilities are considerable. I acknowledge as much, without sarcasm or irony. To be unable to wield those skills on behalf of those to whom you were most loyal… There are no words for how ill your stars must be."

"…! Don't mock me!" Even as his injuries were being healed, Vincent didn't hesitate to needle at Ferris's own wounds. The demi-human had resolved to let it pass—but in the end, he was unable to do so. "Vexed, you call me? You say I don't want to save you? What do *you* know about me…?!" The cat-boy's voice shook. Though his hands were full of healing power, there was anger in his eyes as he glared at his patient.

Vincent was right. Just as he'd said, Ferris's abilities had done nothing against the magical plague and had been impotent to save his homeland or its king. There were many he had wished to save and many he had watched die. Worst of all, the one he *had* to save, Ferris had lost, and the young knight had been swallowed up by his own powerlessness. Yet now he was here, doing this.

His power had been unable to save his prince, but this man, curse him, he could save…

"But His Highness… He never would have thought that way. He may have been lost, but that man would've had me help others. He was never so narrow-minded as to begrudge the happiness of others!"

If he closed his eyes, Ferris could still see that young man's smile as clear as day. How long he had wished for him to be happy, for Ferris and his master to be blessed together. But it was not to be, and his inability to make it so left the healer wishing to die at times. But Ferris knew, well enough to break his heart, that His Highness would never have allowed such a thing.

That was why, even now, Ferris did not withdraw his hand or slacken his effort as he healed this person he reviled.

"Don't mock me, Emperor Volakia. I am the healer of my lord the prince and of the Lion King. In their kindness, they made no distinction among people. So how could I, as their hand, choose some and reject others? If every one of them were alive and well, I would still answer to what was asked of me. I have committed to it—and no less."

"——" Now it was Vincent who did not speak.

Ferris realized he had gotten emotional, but he didn't regret it. The young healer refused to bemoan that he had bombarded the emperor with his words, piling on disrespectful words one after another. In that moment, he felt only love for those two people who evoked such feelings of admiration from him with but a thought. That was the most important thing in Felix Argyle's life. He had reaffirmed as much precisely with his caustic words to the ruler of an entire empire.

"Unless I've missed my guess, that sniping was done by Balleroy Temeglyph," Vincent suddenly offered, letting the words out in one long breath.

"What?" It took Ferris a second to grasp what the emperor had said—and its implications. Balleroy was one of the Nine Divine Generals. It stood to reason that Vincent would know how the man fought.

"Unless one understands his particular abilities and unravels Balleroy's little trick, one will most certainly be destroyed by his hail of missiles. Even if your other knight has seen through his gimmick, one person alone will not likely be able to bring him down. Two might manage—just."

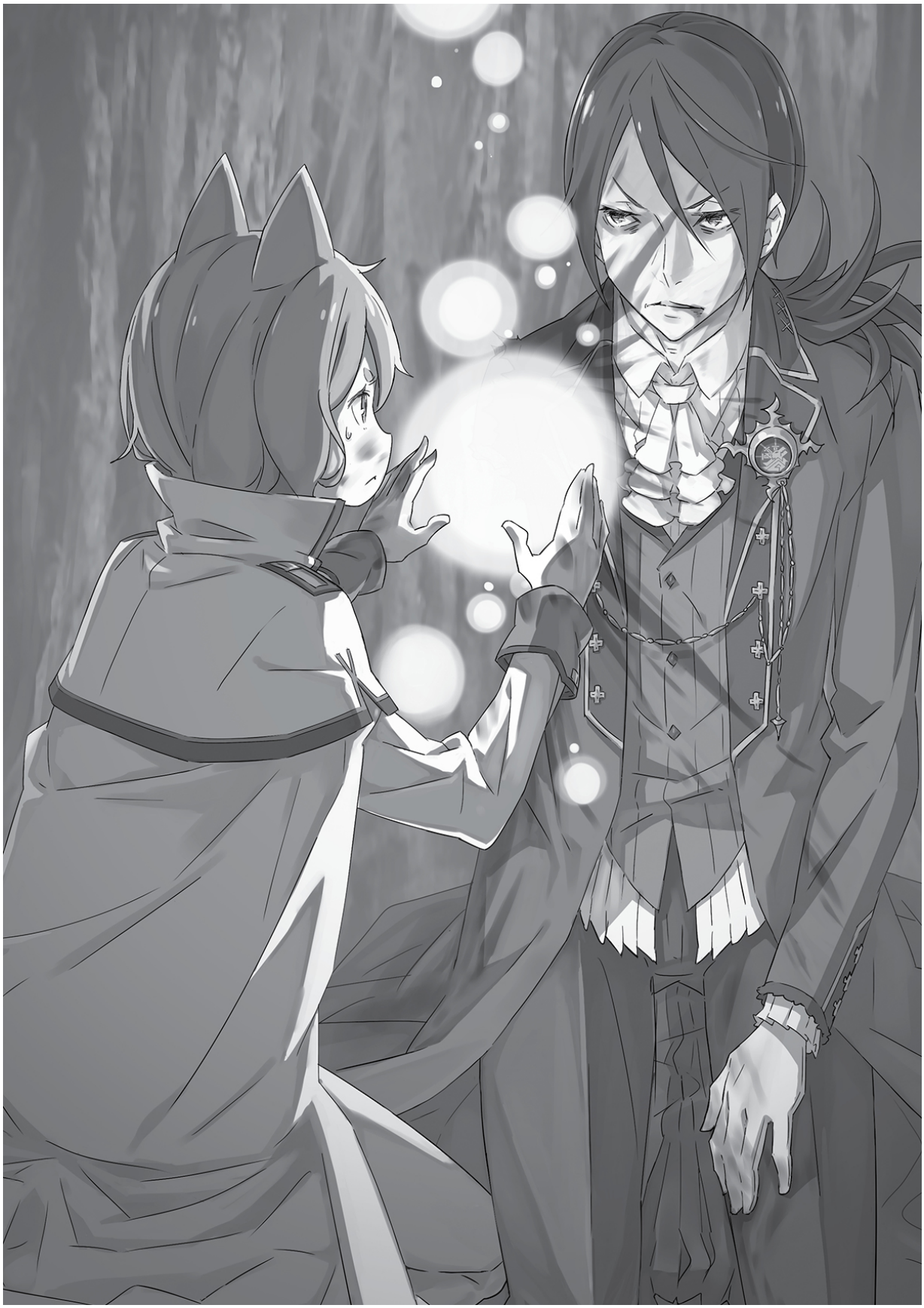
"Two…? But Reinhard is—"

Ferris spared a glance back in the direction of the guardhouse and thought of Reinhard. The Sword Saint was still back there, single-handedly holding off more than fifty assassins. Ferris believed that Julius and Reinhard together could overcome any opponent, no matter who it might be. But at that moment, the chances of Reinhard rejoining them seemed approximately the chances of a bug against a shoe.

"Are those ears of yours for anything more than decoration, beast-boy?"

"Decoration…?"

"I said, *two* might manage. The presence or absence of the Sword Saint is of no consequence."



"____"

With that, Ferris looked down at his small, weak hands. Ferris had just one weapon: the lion-crested dagger he had received from his master. He didn't know how to use it, nor did he possess any skill as a swordsman. If the emperor thought Ferris would suffice as an opponent for one of the Nine Generals, then he thought in vain.

"You may plead impotence, if you wish," Vincent said with a taunting little snort. "In which case, you need only be a passive observer, watching things unfold." When the emperor saw Ferris's eyes widen, he continued, "Perhaps I should use the word *bystander*, instead of *observer*? It seems to be your specialty. The price of your weakness was what you were most loyal to before. Seemingly, you are willing to pay it again."

"I've had *enough*…! Fine! Just fine! Act—that's all I have to do, is it? Take action? Fine!"

That manner of speech Vincent used evoked the greatest anger in Ferris yet. However, the object of his rage wasn't just the emperor—it was his own hesitation. He kept coming up with rationalizations for why he couldn't do things; excuses made everything so easy. But they were disgraceful.

He had spent all his time chasing after people who weren't afraid of such things, and he was still just following in their wake.

"Then listen well, you beast of a person. You need only gamble your life."

Seeing that Ferris had risen to the bait, Vincent beckoned him over with his newly attached right hand. Ferris's face twisted as he heard the Volakian ruler's strategy. The emperor smiled when he saw the look, and for the first time, it was not with disdain. His expression was like one of a boy who had come up with a nasty little trick—a smile cruel and beautiful.

17

The globe of light plummeted from overhead at a severe angle but was batted off course by a neat flourish of a saber. The luminous sphere bounced away with a crash like breaking pottery, and Balleroy whistled from his place in the sky. "Good arm, good eye, good hustle, good call. Ahh, so nice t' have a worthy opponent."

A knight was moving straight toward Balleroy. The man charged across the expanse of the plain, the forest at his back. This man of the Kingdom of

Lugunica, who had called himself Julius Juukulius, was turning out to be a foe who merited genuine respect. His swordsmanship and spirit magic were both first-class. On strength alone, he probably could've risen to the rank of general second-class within the Empire. Perhaps he could have reached an even higher station. Excepting, of course, the fact that the way Julius fought was too honest and courteous.

"In the empire, victory goes to him who wins… Compared with that, your kingdom chivalry is just a lotta nonsense."

If they were to cross swords in one-on-one combat, even Balleroy might've had trouble overcoming Julius. But the whole trick of combat was making the most of your own strengths and not letting the enemy make use of his. Balleroy's strength was long-distance sniping, and he was going to take as much advantage of it as he could. Even better, the Divine General shot from the back of his sky dragon, so that he could always be moving faster than the speed of sound.

"Cheaters always win, and there's nothing like a surprise attack. Don't blame me, chivalry boy—I'm just doin' what works."

He was a Dragon Rider, able to take to the sky on the wings of his mount. Balleroy was among the few in Volakia with the ability to control a sky dragon. The winged creatures were temperamental and refused so much as a saddle. In other words, Dragon Riders flirted with death. There were no reins or belt, nothing that would halt their fall should they ever slip off. Even attempting the task demanded a rare sense of balance—and a trust in one's dragon partner that could best death.

On the backs of soaring dragons, these riders took no heed of terrain, for they struck suddenly from the sky. Crucial to Volakia's military might, these troops were skilled in attack, support, and message carrying. What's more, Balleroy Temeglyph brought something else unique to the profession. Namely…

"I can use light magic to bend light around me and wind magic to diffuse my aura. Now, think y' can find me and Carillon here?"

Using magic to make himself and his mount appear as if they were part of the scenery, he flew where he pleased and shot at his leisure; he was functionally invisible. If there was a downside, it was that Balleroy himself couldn't hear anything, but there was no chance of his being discovered. It was a small price to pay to become a sniper who was constantly in motion—

a battlefield nightmare.

Invisible, unsearchable, unblockable. This unique combination of dragon-riding talent and an exceptional capacity for magic had earned Balleroy the nickname of Magical Sharpshooter. His actions had brought honor to the imperial army and, ultimately, ushered the man into the ranks of the Divine Generals.

And now he had thrown away all that prestige to turn heart and soul against the emperor. All of it to repay the one who had taught him how to live, who had helped him forge his connection with his dragon.

Everything Balleroy had done today was in mourning over his brother-in-law, who had gone to the Kingdom of Lugunica promising great things—and who had never returned, even as a corpse.

"Still, can't let the preliminaries go on too long now…" Balleroy raised an eyebrow. His target was deflecting all his shots, even if only just, and forcing a stalemate. It was the first time he had done battle against a spirit mage in proper combat, and he was discovering what fearsome opponents they were. Unlike normal mages, they used spirits to exploit the mana in the atmosphere, so they never had to risk running out of fuel. The trade-off was the fact that the greatest amount of mana they could use at one time was dictated by the spirit they were contracted with, but…

"___"

Just below Balleroy, Julius batted away another globe of light. He was obviously enhancing his own body with a greater spirit; that was what allowed the knight such superhuman reactions. It served to minimize the burden of the several spirits he had made pacts with. What's more, the spirits would salve the strain on his body almost as it happened. The choice demanded a good deal of pain, but so long as Julius's spirit didn't break, he would be able to continue fighting. In fact, if it came to a contest of endurance, it was Balleroy who was most at risk. The rebellious general had trained only for short, sharp engagements.

"I'm gonna cry uncle before he does at this rate…"

Traditionally, a sniper hid in one place, keeping his opponents pinned down for hours or even days. But there was a time limit on this coup. He couldn't spend long here.

He glanced down again and saw Julius with his back to the woods, as if to say *You shall not pass*. Balleroy knew the wounded emperor was

somewhere in there, as was the knight-girl with the cat ears. Balleroy's true enemy couldn't have been far, either—the red-haired Sword Saint, the world's strongest knight: Reinhard van Astrea.

"When Cecils came back, I thought he might nab my chance."

The single greatest uncertainty in this plan was what Volakia's strongest warrior and greatest optimist would do. Balleroy might be merciless, stopping at nothing, but in the end, he wanted to do the deed himself. From that perspective, he could've practically applauded the three visiting knights for getting away from Cecils alive. It ensured he would have his revenge and that his brother-in-law could rest in peace.

"Hmm…?" Balleroy adjusted the grip on his spear so it was good and firm, but then he was taken aback by something happening below him. A small figure rushed out of the tree line toward Julius. From his perch on his dragon's back, he quickly saw that it was the third Lugunican knight, the girl with the cat ears. He had never paid her any mind; she clearly wasn't a fighter. Balleroy wasn't the type to relish unnecessary killing, so he had gone out of his way not to target her, but now…

"This is how the battlefield works… I'll let you get things moving for me!"

Change could break a stalemate, and victory went to the bold. He who did not hesitate would be triumphant, for the goddess of victory loved best those who were most cruel.

"…!" The girl shouted something at Julius. Her voice was drowned out by rushing air, and Balleroy didn't hear what she said, but Julius did, and his face changed color.

Balleroy was not the only one who could benefit from a change in circumstances. He moved to strike before his opponents could construct any advantage against him.

"Carillon…!" He sent his partner dragon plummeting from the clouds toward the ground. The man had cared for his dragon partner since before she emerged from her egg and shared his Odo with her; their souls were bound together. The bond between a rider and his dragon was much like that between an Insect Cage Clan member and his bugs. For the memory of the one who had given them that opportunity and shown them the way, Balleroy and Carillon would wreak vengeance as one.

"____"

They sliced through the air, leaving sound behind as they plunged through the blue sky, lining up a shot that would pierce Julius and Ferris both. Balleroy unleashed a globe of light at the nearest one: the girl.

There was a spray of blood across the plain, and her body went flying through the air like a rag doll. The light passed through her back and out the right side of her chest, tearing up her bones and organs beyond repair.

"Sorry, little lady." Balleroy no longer felt any guilt about killing women or children. To stand between him and his goal was to forfeit one's life. He understood how brutal that was. That was why he refused to avert his eyes from the sight.

But that commitment, that sniper's ideal, would be his undoing.

"Wha—?!"

Suddenly, the body of the cat-girl, who should have died instantaneously, was engulfed in an incredible light. It shone so brilliantly that it seared the traitorous general's eyes; it was an explosive, blue-white shine that Balleroy didn't recognize as the light of a healing magic beyond all comprehension. Still, he was instinctively cautious, ordering his partner dragon into a steep and urgent climb. They had to gain altitude, get ready for another pass…

"C-Carillon?!" Balleroy almost choked with astonishment as his mount did something he never expected. His fingers brushed along the protrusions on her back—the ones the man normally held on to—and as the dragon twisted up through the sky, Balleroy was shaken loose.

His dragon's sudden outburst had stumped the sniper, but soon, the reason became clear.

"____"

The sky, the blue expanse into which the creature should have been heading, was awash in a vortex of rainbow hues. Carillon was flapping her wings, struggling to escape the colors, but even a dragon that traveled faster than sound could not travel faster than light. She was enveloped by the rainbow and flung from the heavens by its shock wave.

"Carillon…!"

His dragon, his beloved partner, gradually dropped from the air with her wings broken. It was all Balleroy could do to reach out to her, but his hands never found their perch. He stared as the creature plummeted before his eyes.

Farther and farther, the dragon dropped, until she crashed upon the ground.

And all Balleroy could do was watch.

18

"Ferri'll lure them out—you find them and deal with them!"

Julius, occupied by his defensive struggle, went white when he heard what Ferris shouted as he came racing out of the woods. Why hadn't the purple-haired knight been able to say anything back? Perhaps because Ferris's commitment was so clear. Or perhaps because the shot that tore through his small body simply came too quickly.

"Ferris!"

Balleroy had taken change of situation immediately and acted to remove this new variable in the battle. Ferris, shot from behind, lay bleeding on the grass. Even Julius could tell at a look that the wound was fatal. However, the healing spell that erupted promptly after closed the grievous injury, healing Ferris's damage before his very eyes.

He knew that if Ferris had decided to face the enemy, it'd be with a plan in place to ensure he survived.

"I spotted him!"

In the second before Ferris was shot, there had been a rippling of the air behind him. Julius realized instantly that it was the product of Balleroy's unique strategy: using light and wind magic to make himself all but transparent. And once Julius knew what his enemy was doing…

"Al Clauzeria!!" Judging by his friend's wound and the location of the waver in the sky, Julius pointed his saber and leaned on the powers of his greater spirits to create a whirling vortex of magic. Six different colors joined into one beautiful rainbow. The aurora filled the sky in a whirlwind, and a multicolored labyrinth engulfed Julius's opponent. The magic construct was a wall of light, composed of six elements, which meant it was able to repel any sort of magic that might've been leveled against it. It was thoroughly impregnable to physical attacks as well. It went without saying, of course, that serious harm awaited anyone who tried to hit it head-on.

The result was that a green serpent got caught in the rainbow maze and then quickly began to drop through the air.

"It manifests as a rainbow of light—no one can see what is at its end."

The wall vanished, and at the same moment, there was a dull thump of a

sky dragon hitting the ground. It was a gruesome sight; the creature's wings were broken, and its scales were soaked with blood. Such was the product of the dragon slamming into the earth at the speed of sound. By its ragged, shallow breathing, it seemed it had just a minute left to live, perhaps less.

"So ya…did us in, eh…?"

There was a human form as well, dragging their feet, their own breath coming in gasps. This person had similarly struck the ground, a moment before his dragon. It was Balleroy Temeglyph.

It only took Julius an instant to understand what had happened. The dragon had thrown its partner from its back before the rainbow caught them, saving him. Balleroy understood this, too. Hence, why he shambled straight past Julius, to where his beloved dragon lay. The man was there beside his partner for the last few seconds of its life.

"Thanks fer everything, Carillon. Tell Miles to wait for me." Balleroy patted the still creature on the nose, smiling gently at it. Then the warrior rose to his full height and heaved a sigh. "Sorry t' keep ya waitin'. Ya didn't have to."

"A master was saying farewell to his beloved companion. I have a land dragon of my own that means the world to me. I would not wish to be so uncouth as to intrude on this precious moment."

"Keh! Look who's Mr. Noble… But I guess I oughtta thank you. Givin' me a moment to see Carillon off proper. Now listen…" Balleroy turned, his blue eyes looking straight at Julius. His hair was a mess, and blood trickled down his forehead. He had escaped the knight's spell, but he had fallen an awfully long way, and he looked the worse for it. The general's pale face and copious sweat spoke to his internal injuries and broken bones, as well. This much was clear; if he didn't receive treatment immediately, he was done for. "…Don't go saying I gotta ask you for healing, or anything like that. Things are what they are. Ain't a doc in the empire who can fix me up now. Even if there were, I'd refuse."

"But why would you…?"

"You really gotta ask why, sir knight? It's easy. This is the empire, I'm one of the Nine Divine Generals, and you're my enemy."

Julius had assumed this contest settled, but Balleroy spoke with strength. In his hands was his spear, his favored weapon, and he spun it with dismaying speed as he took up a fighting stance. This was not a man to be

dismissed, even at the edge of death. Balleroy had begun his rebellion against Emperor Vincent with the utmost determination. Even if his life was to be saved now, if his mutiny failed, all that awaited him was execution.

"So you'll fight to the bitter end, in forfeit of your very life?"

"Nothin' so high-minded as all that… Let's just say I don't know when to give up. All I want is to get this spear to my aim. That's all. That's all I want."

"Your aim…?"

"'S right. The Sword Saint's throat."

The tip of the spear exuded a murderous intent, and Balleroy's aura grew sharper than before. Julius sensed his immovable pride as a warrior and took a moment to admire the man. Then, a beat later, he took up a stance with his own saber, prepared to fight.

"As a warrior myself, I acknowledge your skill. But Reinhard is my friend. For the sake of my kingdom, and for that of my companions, I cannot allow you to reach your goal."

"Great! Then all that's left for the two of us is a test of skill!"

As Julius's fighting aura grew quietly sharper and more focused, his opponent's violent excitement began to burst from his spirit. The two of them locked eyes.

"Julius Juukulius, knight of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica."

"Balleroy Temeglyph, ninth of the Nine Divine Generals of the Empire of Volakia."

As was the custom among warriors, they both announced their names and stations, and then the fight began.

It was Balleroy who made the first move, striking so quickly with his spear that the attack was almost invisible. One had the sense that the tip of the spear had vanished, and then a moment later, it was coming to bite into Julius's chest. The polearm was faster than should have been possible for being wielded by a man riddled with wounds, but Julius swept the strike aside with a flash of his own sword. His defensive reflexes remained sharpened by his light magic, and the knight was reluctant to claim victory

via augmented abilities. However…

"That's just another part of your skills, eh!" Balleroy exclaimed, seemingly sensing Julius's thoughts even as he loosed blow after blow. The knight parried each strike of the spear, pushing off the ground to pursue Balleroy. He raced across the plain, sweeping aside each stab as they came. Sparks flew each time the steel met, and the impacts were clearly taking a toll on them both. Julius felt as if every exchange took a bit of life out of him as his concentration and spirit were worn away.

There were, broadly speaking, two ways to attack with a spear: to thrust and to sweep. This was not unlike a sword, but thrusts were more common with a spear. They were a series of attacks aimed at a specific point, or points, demanding an opponent exhaust an enormous amount of focus in order to maintain their guard.

Neither of them could sustain this battle very long, and they both knew it. So after some probing exchanges and feeling each other out, the fight began in earnest.

Clang!

When Julius deflected an oncoming thrust and closed in to press his attack, Balleroy caught the swinging blade with the haft of his spear. He was unable to completely blunt the impact, though, and flew backward. In that instant, the mood of the battle changed.

"____"

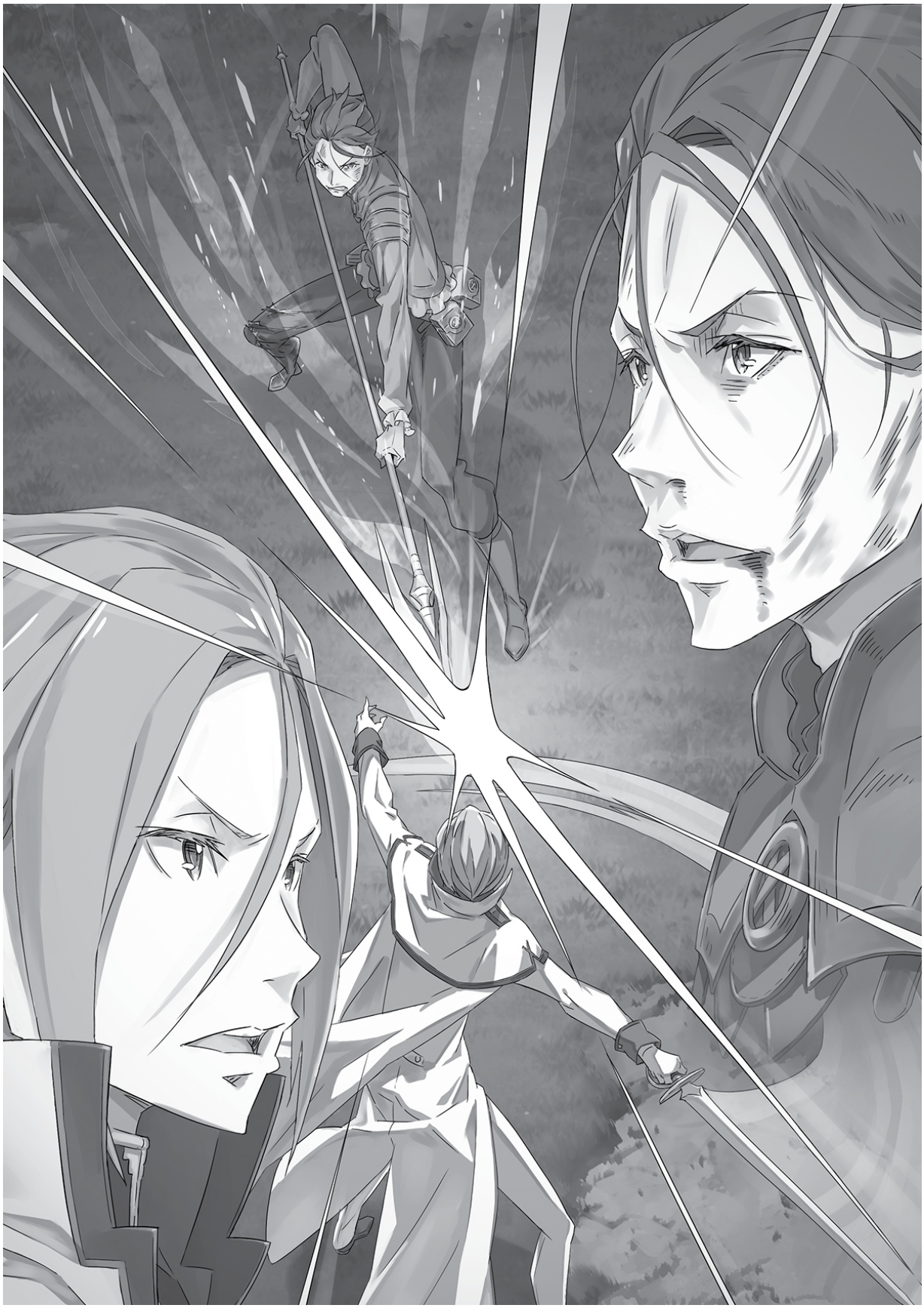
It happened before Julius could even register that it was coming. From the tip of the spear Balleroy had pointed at him, a magic missile of colorless light erupted. It was the same kind of attack the general had used when sniping atop his dragon mount. The charge, aiming, and firing all took such a short time that it was almost artistic. The projectile flew at Julius's chest with no sound or warning.

The purple-haired knight could see a furious intent to kill in Balleroy's eyes, and Julius pushed the limit of his reactions until they were as fast as lightning. The blade of his saber just brushed the magic missile, nudging it off course so that it only collided with Julius's shoulder. At the very least, the knight had avoided a mortal wound…

"Ngh!"

That was when an impact slammed into his sternum, causing his organs to shudder and coaxing blood up and out his mouth, along with a groan.

He had avoided the magical sniper shot. And yet something had pierced his chest with terrific force. Desperately trying to process what had happened through a fog of pain, Julius hit upon the possibility of a second sniper shot.



By hiding a second shot behind the first, it ensured one of the shots would hit, even if the first was parried. A simple but extremely effective trick. If one was facing an opponent with the wherewithal to defend against the magic missiles, such a trick would be all the more likely to destroy them.

Unfortunately, things only got worse from there.

"Your life is mine." Balleroy was on the offensive now, following up his ploy with a deadly third shot. This final round followed the previous one with an uncanny swiftness. The Divine General's weapon was pointed directly between the eyebrows of his prey. The attack was aimed at the heart and the head, twin vital points. It was a move that seemed as if it could have even killed one of the allegedly immortal vampires.

It appeared that the sniper shots would prove the point. However, at the last instant, Balleroy's face stiffened.

"____"

Julius, who had been blown backward by a shot to the heart, was holding his ground. That by itself was shock enough for Balleroy; closer inspection of the knight's chest revealed something very strange. Ferris had been hit exactly the same way, and yet Julius's wounds were much lighter. Julius had prepared a second line of defense: a layer of earth-element armor upon his body.

"My spear—he was still able to—!"

Balleroy could only be impressed by such meticulous fighting, but he was still a hair faster. To cheat death did not necessarily mean to be completely unaffected by an attack. He put all his strength into his hands, which held his spear, and his legs, which pressed forward as he gave a decisive thrust, seeking to penetrate Julius's defenses. Even a knight of the Kingdom of Lugunica wouldn't survive a crushed skull. A single, fatal pass—that would decide this contest…

"Al Clarista," Julius intoned.

The enemy who had avoided Balleroy's killing blow, who had backed away so as not to fall—that man was even now responding to the general's final thrust and had managed to utter an invocation. When had there been time? Why had Balleroy allowed him that? Why, why, why—?

For that matter, why did his own strike feel so slow? The tip of his spear

should have arrived first, yet it was being erased by this knight who exuded such brilliant, multicolored light. There wasn't even any sensation of metal on metal; there was no shearing as steel was cut away.

In the end, Balleroy's senses didn't even permit him to draw back or press in farther. The contest was decided in that one, brief instant of attack pitted against defense.

"Well now, ain't this a surprise…?" The shimmer of a rainbow had pierced the left side of Balleroy's chest, the scintillating colors scorching his soul. But what filled Balleroy's heart was admiration for the skill of this enemy who had brought him to defeat. When it was all over, the reason the rebel's moves had felt so dull and slow hadn't been because of the fear of losing, nor was it merely his imagination.

Balleroy's body had been enveloped in a faint light. It was the glow of dark magic encountering and opposing light magic. Light magic to strengthen his own body, dark magic to weaken that of his opponent—Julius was casting both at the same time, a delicate and involved maneuver. Who knew that the kingdom held such a fearsome opponent?

"To think I ain't even made it to my real target… I guess I really have… lost my touch…" Balleroy dropped his spear and stumbled back a step, whereupon the knight's sword pierced his chest. Blood didn't even flow from the wound. The light, short and intense, cauterized the cut and incinerated the man's organs, his very spirit.

Balleroy continued on, unsteadily, until he arrived at the still form of his beloved dragon. He managed to slump down beside her, leaning against that great form, and let out a breath. Behind him, Julius the knight sheathed his sword.

"Lord Balleroy, what drove you to such plotting?" The young man seemed to presume the fight was over—a naive idea. Even without his spear, Balleroy was capable of attacking with a deadly accurate magic missile. But no; let no one say he didn't know when he was beaten.

He could do it, and he might. At least, Julius should have regarded him that way.

"You don't pull your punches, do you? …Can't say I would expect you to understand."

"You nearly shattered the empire and brought on war with my kingdom. You're right, I don't understand. Nor do I understand your obsession with the

Sword Saint—with Reinhard."

"That one's easy enough to explain. To put it nice and simple, it was about…revenge."

Julius's eyes widened in surprise, as if he could never have expected this. It wasn't the pettiness that seemed to shock him, but the whole idea. The man had seemingly never imagined the Sword Saint might incur the ill will of anyone. In Julius's mind, Reinhard was above such trite tragedies as becoming the object of revenge.

"Looks to me like you've got…some pretty innocent ideas about the world…"

"…I've heard the same from my friends. I believe I am working to improve that aspect of myself."

"Good, good to hear. Otherwise, y' might just end up one of the bad guys, like me…" Then Balleroy laughed at the outrageously frank exchange, his hilarity coming in thin, reedy breaths. His consciousness was gradually dropping in and out, and he tried to hold on to it long enough to say something else. But what, he didn't know. Words of hatred, perhaps.

"Are there any last words you wish to leave to Reinhard?"

Balleroy let out a harsh breath. "…That'd be downright ignoble of me. A loser ought to just go his way. But I do feel bad for your pretty cat-eared friend, the way I…"

Julius seemed to be shaking his head as if to preempt this apology, but Balleroy found himself thinking about the unfortunate young woman, the one poor innocent who found herself involved. Things like the success or failure of the rebellion started by the person who had contracted him, and whether Vincent lived or died—they were unimportant to Balleroy. That was why he had the wherewithal to feel pity for those whom he himself had killed in the course of this all.

Condolences or no, Balleroy's clouded eyes afforded him the vision of an approaching figure. It was coming toward him through the grass. The person stopped beside Julius.

"Hate to break it to you, but Ferri doesn't go down that easily."

"…Hah."

There she was, her white outfit stained with blood, but her movements showing no sign of any wounds. Ferris breathed a sigh to see Balleroy.

Julius, Ferris, and the red-haired Sword Saint, Reinhard. Three people

Balleroy could not best. The dying Divine General knew about the whispers, the nasty hearsay making the rounds in other lands that spoke of the Volakian Empire being protected by a barrier constructed by devils. However, the Kingdom of Lugunica seemed to be made of nothing but extraordinary and fearsome characters itself.

"Do tell His Majesty one thing for me… Tell him that if he's gonna have it out with the kingdom, to make sure he stays the course till it's all dust."

"I must say I have complicated feelings about relaying that message… But very well."

There was a rumble in Balleroy's throat; what he had intended as his life's final joke had been received with utmost seriousness. He had the distinct feeling Julius really would give Vincent the message, verbatim. He was confident, then, as one of the Nine Divine Generals, that his last words would reach the emperor. "I'm glad that…in the end…I really didn't kill any women or children…"

Balleroy let out a breath, and in it, he realized he was shyer than he had thought. The man was having a laugh at himself when a familiar face arose in the distance against his closed eyelids. He saw it was the face of the person to whom he owed his life: his older brother-in-law, who had raised him like a parent. He looked down. "Sorry, Miles. Think this is the end of the line for me."

Balleroy murmured something, in a voice so soft and faint that it couldn't be heard, and then breathed his last.

He had come full circle: The tale that had begun with the faking of his death had ended with his actual demise. At the very least, there were unlikely to be any among his subordinates who would prove to be consummate opponents in the way Balleroy was for the knights. That was not to say, of course, that the other assassins they faced, like the Insect Cage Clan that Reinhard had confronted, were not a threat.

"But, Julius, with you and Reinhard here, we should be all right. Don't you think so, too?"

"I mean to do my very best to justify your faith in me. But before that…"

"Before that, what? Hey, what is it?!"

Ferris peeked over at Julius from one side. The spirit mage turned to his friend with his innocent gesture, looking at the site of Ferris's sniper wound. He touched the spot with his fingers. The young demi-human's back and chest

were both soaked with blood; there was no question a missile had passed through him. But when Julius wiped the blood away, there was only pale skin, smooth and soft. Not even a scar remained.

"…That sets my mind at ease. If you came back with so much as a scratch on you, I don't know how I would ever face Duchess Karsten again."

"Hmph! That doesn't mean *mew* can just go pawing all over me! You're the one who just stuck your hands in my blood, so don't go blaming me if *mew* get sick!"

"Your safety comes first. Indeed… I thought I might expire myself when I saw you."

When Ferris had gotten it into his head to serve as bait, there had been no time to stop him as he went running out. In the blink of an eye, he had been hit by Balleroy's sniper shot and collapsed, covered in blood. Julius had engaged Balleroy then, not wanting the opportunity Ferris had bought to be in vain, but he could hardly hide his wish to run to his fallen friend. He may have had faith that Ferris had some sort of plan, but—

"I never wish to see one I cherish fall before my eyes. I can't tell you how glad I am."

"Feels pretty nice to hear it from you. But well, that's just like you, Julius." Ferris received the other knight's words with an embarrassed smile and a scratch of the cheek. Julius noticed the slightest difference in his demeanor from a moment before. Ferris had sustained a seemingly fatal wound, been covered in blood, and yet seemed downright cheerful—perhaps something had changed in his heart?

"Ferris, I doubt I need to ask, but His Majesty, Emperor Vincent…?"

"Fully healed and resting under the trees. At least, he's probably still there—don't think he has it in him yet to go running off."

"I see. Another relief." Julius removed his own cloak and handed it to the cat-boy. It had hardly come through the battle unscathed, but at least it wasn't soaked in blood and riddled with holes, as Ferris's was. It would at least cover his shoulders.

As the healer pulled the cape on, Julius turned toward Balleroy, offering another silent prayer on his behalf. He had been a terrible enemy of astonishing skill, a warrior whose loss was keenly felt.

"Thank you for your help, Ferris. If you hadn't done what you did, I don't believe I could have defeated him. Ugh, I still have so much to learn."

“Ferri feels a little funny realizing he knew exactly what you needed without so much as talking about it… Well, Ferri’s no stranger than you, Julius.”

The purple-haired man didn’t respond to this rather backhanded acknowledgment. Instead, he simply narrowed his eyes. Balleroy had betrayed the emperor and conspired to commit rebellion, but Julius didn’t think he would go out of his way to explain why. Balleroy himself hadn’t spoken of it, and he would respect those wishes. It didn’t matter whether the fallen was an enemy or a member of his own kingdom. If there was one thing he could say, though…

“I wish I’d had the chance to speak more with you.”

He might not have been able to fully understand everyone he met, but that did not excuse him from making the effort. His wish was futile, though, in the face of this corpse, and Julius turned back to the forest path behind him. Ferris followed after to find two figures coming their way.

One was Reinhard, uninjured and waving. The other was Vincent, leaning on the Sword Saint’s shoulder.

The unrest in the empire, unrest that had involved the Kingdom of Lugunica as well, was approaching its end.

19

They walked back directly toward the Crystal Palace, showing themselves on the main thoroughfare of the capital of Lupghana. It was Vincent’s choice, his declaration of victory: Balleroy Temeglyph had fallen, the Insect Cage Clan had been vanquished, and the rebellion had ended in failure.

“____”

The first reaction of the denizens of the capital who saw the emperor coming down the main street was one of disbelief. That was to be expected. For His Imperial Majesty, despite his composure, was drenched in blood, and his already pale cheeks were nearly bloodless. If it had not been broad daylight, people might have taken him for a lost, wandering hollow.

But the citizenry soon recovered, kneeling before the emperor as he walked along at a casual pace. The impulse spread, person by person, until everyone in the vicinity of the main street had come to bow their head or bend their knee.

“Wow” was Ferris’s very succinct summation of the feelings evoked by this display.

Vincent nearly smiled before his expression shifted to his customary sneer instead as he turned to Ferris. “This is the fear of an emperor, the way my realm ought to respond to me.”

“The way they ought to respond? You mean the way they’re all cowering because they’re so afraid of you?”

“If one seeks to rule others, power and fear are the fastest and most certain methods. Even in this bloodied state, no one would dare do so much as pitch a rock at their emperor.”

“…No one would have thrown a rock at the king, either—because they loved him too much,” Ferris said, quickly looking away, but Vincent just snorted. Anyone listening to them might have thought their differences of opinion went all the way to the very tops of their respective nations. The king of Lugunica was loved by his people, while the emperor of Volakia was feared by his. Which was really the better way to rule, only history would tell. One thing was certain, however: Vincent, appearing before his people with barely enough blood in his veins and hardly any strength in his muscles, still cut an impressive figure. The slender man showed no hesitation and refused to lean on anyone.

“I’ll let you entertain His Majesty,” Reinhard murmured, largely ignoring the conversation as he scanned the area vigilantly. “Though, I doubt even the emperor’s enemies would make a move with so many witnesses around.”

Reinhard had fought a rearguard action against more than fifty Insect Cage Clan members, yet he had emerged without so much as a bruise to speak of on his body, nor a stain worth mentioning on his outfit. When he had rejoined the others, his report that he had not killed a single assassin was both heartening and terrifying. Those feelings were, of course, airy and fleeting when compared with how encouraging it was to have him for an ally.

“Balleroy had to be our foes’ trump card, and he has fallen. I would be surprised if they had anything or anyone more powerful in store, but…I *wouldn’t* be surprised if they were racing to eliminate all traces of their treachery at this very moment,” Julius said.

“You believe they would recuse themselves now?”

“I believe this is their last opportunity to do so, if they want to minimize the damage. With Your Majesty as our ally, your enemies risk turning the

entire empire against themselves."

Speed had been of the essence in this rebellion. With Balleroy defeated and what was known of their plans in shambles, it would not advantage whoever was behind this to persist in trying to seize power. They could either destroy the evidence of their misdeeds or flee to a foreign country. It seemed likely to be one of the two.

"Ferri would *not* be happy about that after he got shot because of them."

"Without your brave deed, we would never have avoided war. I am proud to call you my friend."

"And that's supposed to be my reward, Julius? Ferri hears a lot about friendship from you, but you ought to know you can't be Ferri's friend that easily."

Julius caught the desolate whisper, as well as its true meaning. For Ferris, the word *friend* was a heavy one. It was not a declaration to be made lightly.

As they spoke, they went along a roadway thronged with citizens showing their loyalty, then through the castle gates. They pushed past a crowd of trembling imperial soldiers and at last returned to the Crystal Palace, whereupon…

"Is it true? His Majesty has returned?!" When the group entered the great hall of the palace with Vincent at their head, they heard a bellowing voice. On the second floor of the room stood a fearsome man in golden armor, a scowl on his battle-scarred face. When this man saw the emperor there below him, he descended the steps with a speed that belied his size and came to kneel before Vincent. "Your Majesty, thank the heavens you're safe! The vassals are here! The foot soldiers are here! I have been overseeing them with all my heart!!"

"Silence, you ape. Or have you forgotten how I told you that every time you open your mouth, you embarrass the empire? You were to keep it shut. My imperial dignity is at its lowest ebb this day."

"Sir! But—Your Majesty! There is still unrest in the castle…"

"This is twice now. Shut your mouth, Goz Ralphone."

Thus, Vincent silenced the burly giant, Goz Ralphone, one of the Nine Divine Generals. The gold-armored man seemed to shrink into himself as the emperor regarded him with a cold, cutting gaze. "To trust this matter to you lot would bring any authority the empire has crashing to earth. Therefore, I myself declare: The purported death of Balleroy of the Nine Divine Generals

and all that has happened to my person were the work of plotters who sought to pin everything on the Royal Knights of Lugunica. Balleroy joined forces with these shameless traitors and sought after my life. Though, he has since shuffled off this mortal coil."

"…! Balleroy—did he really do such a thing?" Goz said, trembling.

"It pains me to say it, but all is as His Majesty has told you." This assurance came from someone stepping forth from behind Vincent—an old man who had come from outside the Crystal Palace. Several imperial soldiers were with him, and at his appearance, Vincent crossed his slim arms.

"So you're here, Belstetz. How unusual to see the Imperial Prime Minister leading men under arms himself."

The old man met Vincent's venomous tone with a calm shake of his head. "How could I fail to rouse these old bones to action, Your Majesty, when I heard you had been kidnapped?"

Given what had been heard of his name and title, there could be no mistake that this man was Belstetz Fondalphon, the Imperial Prime Minister. If the Nine Divine Generals were the zenith of the nation's military, the prime minister similarly stood at the height of its bureaucracy. As the man who oversaw the country's entire administration, he was truly second in power only to the emperor. Which made it all the stranger he hadn't been seen in the audience chamber before…

"First and foremost, Your Majesty, let me express my boundless joy at your safe return. And to these knights who surely exerted every effort to see you here safely, my equally boundless gratitude."

"Enough with the pleasantries, old man. Tell us what you're really saying and tell us quickly," Vincent said.

Belstetz looked as bothered as if a cool breeze had blown past him. "You are indeed a man who prizes brevity, Your Majesty. But undue haste may work against that for which we have striven. I urge you to remember as much."

"You dare to admonish your emperor? Know that it will be your last act of public service, you senile dog. I shall tell you a second time. Speak, and quickly."

"Far be it from me to admonish your revered personage, Your Majesty." Vincent's gaze grew colder, but Belstetz met him with cunning. "I tell you

only that we have here the conclusion of rushed plans."

As the emperor furrowed his brow at this response, the prime minister motioned one of his personal guard forward. He held a wooden box in his arms, which he offered up to Vincent. Reaching out toward the container, Belstetz opened the lid.

"Urgh!" The exclamation at the box's contents came from Ferris. But it was an understandable reaction. Julius, standing beside the demi-human, frowned at what he saw.

Inside the box was the head of a middle-aged man. It had been severed at the neck, the face contorted into a look of profound regret. Vincent, inspecting the pale and bloodless face, looked at Belstetz with one eye closed.

"I humbly present Your Majesty the head of Viscount Glamdart Holstoy, a retainer whose heart brimmed with treachery. All that has happened was at Holstoy's instigation. He confessed to everything in a written note before throwing himself on his sword at his private residence."

"You do indeed work quickly, Belstetz."

"I confess there were some rather intense moments after the report of General Temeglyph's death arrived. When I heard a sky dragon had arrived at Holstoy's mansion shortly thereafter, it was only natural to question one of his people about the goings-on at the house. I apologize to Your Majesty for acting on my own initiative."

"Your initiative was very much in view when I praised your quick work." Vincent took a piece of paper that Belstetz offered him. He glanced at it, then looked back at the head in the box. "You say everything that has happened was conceived inside this head?"

"Indeed. Regicide, to be blamed on the knights from Lugunica; followed by the seizure of the throne in the name of punishing the killers. His ambitions were, one might say, imperial—they lacked only the proper forethought."

"You believe that despite the fact that he was able to turn one of the Nine Divine Generals to his cause?"

"What else could be said of a rebellion that has failed?"

Belstetz's unflinching opinion seemed to conclude everything in Julius's mind. The diplomatic mission from Lugunica had been cleared of all charges, their innocence proven. War between the empire and the kingdom had been avoided. The matter had been resolved. So why did his skin prickle so?

The source of unrest was unmistakably coming from Vincent. Without relaxing in the slightest, the emperor let out an audible breath. "Ahem—Belstetz."

"Your Majesty," Belstetz replied with a smile. "What is your imperial will?"

"I order you: Do not move." With his right hand, the emperor silently grasped a scabbard that suddenly appeared, floating in midair.

"____"

From the hovering scabbard, he drew out a sword, straight and true,

crimson as a garnet from the hilt to the edge. It was a blade of blades, beautiful, so lovely as to captivate any onlookers. And without a moment's hesitation, the emperor pressed it, of all places, against the neck of Belstetz, who stood still as a stone.

The sword's speed and finely honed cutting edge could easily have sent the old man's head flying. Yet the crimson sword tasted no blood. Belstetz, rather than being beheaded, continued to smile. The old man slowly touched a hand to his own neck. "Such a jest is most unlike Your Majesty."

"The Bright Sword is not such a trivial thing as to be drawn in jest. It cuts what we wish to cut, and it consumes with flames what we wish to burn. Behold."

Suddenly, fire erupted from the sword in the emperor's hand and leaped to the box in the soldier's hands. The man dropped the box, but it did not so much as singe the carpet, for the flames had not touched the wooden compartment but consumed only the thing inside. The head of the man who, the emperor had been told, was treacherous to his liege had been burned up completely, returned to ash.

"Truly, the Bright Sword shines only for those fit to occupy the imperial throne," Belstetz said, his eyes narrowed. "It is indeed beautiful and terrible."

"With its flames, the blade tests those who would wield it. But there is a way to handle it," Vincent said, giving a flourish of the sword. Then he held it out to Belstetz, pommel first, smiling as the prime minister looked down at it. "Would you try it? Don't you wish to know if your old bones could rule an empire?"

"…Again, you jest, Your Majesty. Such aspirations are beyond this feeble, aged flesh." The prime minister bowed at the waist, pointedly not laying a finger on the Bright Sword and excusing himself from the opportunity to challenge the blade. "You may entrust me with cleaning up the mess that has resulted from these events. You, Your Majesty, should think first of your own health."

Then with a word to his soldiers, Belstetz collected the ashes of the head and withdrew. Watching them go, Julius felt his shoulders slump. Beside him, Ferris was smiling with evident relief. "Wh-why were things so tense just now? Aren't they sup*purr*sed to be friends?"

"Many things can happen within a castle's walls. Perhaps outsiders like

us will never be able to know exactly what. Reinhard… I admire you for not getting involved."

"Because there was murder in His Majesty's blade, yes, but I saw he did not truly intend it."

"How could you tell…?" Ferris asked, furrowing his shapely brow.

Julius had likewise perceived that Vincent's swing of the Bright Sword had contained the readiness to kill, but Reinhard, it seemed, had seen something more. Of those there, perhaps only he, Vincent himself, and Belstetz—standing still as a stone—had understood there would be no murder in that room.

"Hmph. And to think, I very nearly had the tiger by the tail," Vincent muttered teasingly after the prime minister had disappeared from view. He casually released his grip on the Bright Sword, and the crimson blade disappeared as if swallowed up by the same thin air it had come from.

This legendary implement, said to be passed down from one leader of the Empire of Volakia to the next, was of considerable interest to Julius. However, at that moment, Vincent's half-heard whisper was of even more concern. The exchange between the emperor and the prime minister, the viscount's suicide—it all pointed to one person as the true culprit…

Julius took a hesitant step forward toward Vincent. "Your Majesty, please forgive me, as what I'm about to ask is a terrible breach of etiquette, but—"

"Yes, hello, I'm here! I didn't mean to keep you all waiting so long for my grand entrance! Your Majesty's humble servant, Cecils Segmund, has arrived at the Crystal Palace to seek revenge on Your Imperial Majesty's behalf!"

Julius, however, was interrupted by a voice like a bolt of lightning. A young man in a kimono appeared, rushing through the crowd in the great hall of the Crystal Palace so fast, it seemed he might scorch the ground beneath his feet. It was Cecils, a broad smile on his face and his thicket of blue hair waving.

When he discovered Julius and the others turning to him in surprise from among the ranks of imperial soldiers, he exclaimed, "Yah-hah! There you are, I've found you, I have located you at last! You certainly gave me the runaround—I was all over the capital looking for you after that escape. And

then I get word that you've come back to the castle with His Majesty covered in blood. This I will not forgive, royal knights of Lugunica! To lay hands on His Majesty's person! This rage shall be my fuel, the humiliation of my loss to you my catalyst, and together, they shall awaken the ultimate sword-fighting abilities of I, Cecils Seg—"

"Look over here, you simpleton."

"What is this? I am at this moment delivering the greatest soliloquy of my life, such that even His Imperial Majesty could not stop—"

But even as he spoke, he turned toward Vincent, and their eyes met. When Cecils saw that it was the emperor who had spoken to him, his eyes went wide, and he stopped in midsentence.

"What?! Your Majesty, were you not lured into a cruel trap to suffer an ignoble death, your head then to be presented before me as a goad to inspire my greatest feats of swordsmanship?!"

"Truly, your clownery has reached new heights," Vincent said with a sniff in regard to the swordsman's dramatic outpouring. Cecils, though, was quick to recover from his shock, wheeling on Julius and the others.

"No, no, and again I say, no! It is the fortune of fortunes that His Majesty is still alive! Let us forget about the presentation of the head, then, and may Your Majesty take this opportunity to observe my technique at close range! For I will uproot these audacious royalists who make bold to appear before us—"

"____"

"Ngha?!" The overexcited Cecils found his collar grabbed by a massive hand. It belonged to the huge, silent protector standing beside His Majesty, Goz Ralphone. Without a word, as the emperor had instructed, he shattered Cecils's dramatic performance. The empire's most powerful swordsman kicked his feet uselessly, like a cat held by the scruff of its neck.

"Just a moment, Goz, my friend! Why do you stop me?! Look there! Those knights stand before us, knowing the entire empire is arrayed against them! They know they would be better matched against me alone than against every man here, yet have they not chosen the dramatic, the mythical?!"

"____"

"Why won't you say anything, Goz?! Having that craggy face of yours glaring at me makes a body nervous, you know!"

Goz, unperturbed by Cecils's midair struggle, glanced in Vincent's

direction. The emperor nodded, just. Permission to speak, one supposed.

"…This overheated talk of yours is nothing new, so I'll let it go—but you need to calm down."

"How can I calm down?! There they are, even the very red-haired one against whom I bear such a grudge! You can't imagine the look the swordsmith gave me when I went to get my first- and second-best swords back. If I'm not to use them now, then when?!"

"I admire your enthusiasm, but His Majesty already has things well in hand. Read my lips: It's all over."

"Er?" Cecils had been so itching to draw his weapons that it looked as if he had received a most unexpected blow. The man appeared more and more shaken as he was given a broad outline of what had happened. Finally, he looked around at them vacantly, his gaze settling on Reinhard. "Um, then what about settling things between us?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask that it be another time," Reinhard responded with a wry smile. "Perhaps when I'm not in…this situation." He tapped a finger against the collar around his neck.

"Ahh, yes indeed," Cecils said, nodding. "But—doesn't that mean I am wholly and truly outmatched?!"

The despairing cry of the empire's strongest swordsman concluded the special diplomatic mission between the Empire of Volakia and the Kingdom of Lugunica.

20

"So what exactly are we supposed to make of all this?" Ferris put a thoughtful finger to his lips as he and the rest of the group rode away from Lupghana in a dragon carriage. They were on the way to a guardhouse on the border between the empire and the kingdom. From there, it was onward to home.

Ferris's question was aimed at the two members of the Council of Elders, seated across from him just as they had been on the way here. Miklotov and Bordeaux had been kept in confinement by imperial soldiers during all that had happened. The two of them had been safely released, and the entire royal delegation was now making its way back to Lugunica.

Much as that was a relief, repeated requests of the two captives for

additional details went effectively unanswered.

"Hmm," Miklotov responded. "I understand why you might feel that some loose ends remain to be tied up, young Ferris, but I believe we shall proceed just as His Majesty said. All these events constituted a purely domestic matter within the empire. As such, I was told the royal delegation would be rewarded with appropriate recompense."

"Appropriate recompense… Does that mean we're getting the nonaggression pact?" asked the cat-boy, not looking much happier. Miklotov nodded silently.

After everything had been dealt with, and Miklotov and Bordeaux had been released, Vincent had summoned them all to his audience chamber once again. Whereupon, he promptly agreed to the nonaggression pact they had requested. The bureaucratic formalities remained, of course, but with that, the objective of their envoy had been achieved.

Yet somehow, the group didn't feel they could wholeheartedly celebrate.

"It just doesn't quite sit right with me," Ferris commented.

"Live with it," Bordeaux replied, crossing his beefy arms. "We might not like exactly how it happened, but we got what we wanted. Gotta call that a victory. We have our nonaggression pact, even if it does have a time limit. Just means we know exactly how long we have to get the kingdom back on track." His eyebrows were arched, and he seemed to be trying to convince himself as much as Ferris.

Julius nodded at the frowns on Ferris's and Bordeaux's faces. He himself, though, was bothered by something slightly different than they were.

"You look troubled, Julius," Reinhard said from beside him, as if the Sword Saint could see right through his friend.

"I am," Julius said honestly, moved to look into his comrade's eyes. "I don't suppose I'd be very convincing if I tried to deny it. Truth be told, something still piques my interest in Volakia. Something, if I may say, I almost regret having left undone."

"If there's anything you regret, you should let us know. Given our position, I don't think we'll be coming back here with any regularity."

Having a nonaggression pact didn't mean relations between the two countries were going to improve. And what's more, Julius was a member of the royal guard. It wasn't his place to be leaving the capital. However, the worries that remained in the man's heart concerned none of these things.

“You have a regret, Julius? Ooh, what is it? Do you wish you could have tried riding on a sky dragon? Or gotten a better look at that weird red sword His Majesty had?”

“Ferris, I am not a child…”

“So that stuff didn’t interest you at all?”

“…Ahem. In any event, that was not what I had in mind.” Realizing he was not likely to win this debate, Julius simply dismissed the demi-human’s interjection. Instead, he turned to Miklotov, sitting across from him and stroking his beard. “Lord Miklotov. Is it possible His Majesty himself was pulling the strings behind everything that happened on this trip?”

“——” The old counselor stopped stroking his beard at that. He squinted, calmly meeting Julius’s gaze.

“What do you mean?” It was not Miklotov, but Reinhard who answered. “Emperor Vincent, pulling the strings—of what, exactly?”

“Everything. All of it. Master Balleroy’s betrayal, the Viscount Holstoy, who allegedly masterminded the attempted coup—what if the entire plot was part of Emperor Vincent’s calculations?”

“Th-that’s not possible, is it? I mean, just think about it—if Ferri hadn’t tended to His Majesty’s wounds, I guarantee he would’ve died. If he knew there was going to be a rebellion, then before it even started, he could have —”

“Vincent Volakia is a consummately rational man,” Miklotov interrupted, having resumed his beard stroking. Julius raised his eyebrows and asked another probing question.

“Then, Lord Miklotov, you believe you know what he was thinking, as well?”

“——”

At that, Miklotov curled his lips into a quiet smile, but he didn’t answer. Julius, though, realized with astonishment that the silence itself was the answer, the most eloquent possible response.

“The emperor didn’t actually want a war between the kingdom and the empire. It would have been in his interest to grant the nonaggression pact we were requesting. But…there was a reason he couldn’t do so too readily.”

Citizens of the empire, be strong. It was the very teaching that drove the succession of the Volakian Empire.

Lugunica had lost its covenant with the Holy Dragon. There suddenly

seemed to be a decisive shift in the cold war that had stood for so long between the two nations; the empire could not have been better poised to attack. From the perspective of its citizens, at the very least, a nonaggression pact would surely have been unacceptable. Unless, perhaps, there were some excuse. Some reason that compelled negotiations with the kingdom…

"So *mew* think he deliberately schemed to have our delegation caught up in an attempted coup?"

"Obviously, if the gears didn't mesh just so, the outcome would have been very different," Reinhard said. "I'm sure His Majesty was quite careful to guarantee everything went off as planned. No doubt he had agents among the rebels, pushing for certain courses of action and controlling the path of events."

"But who in the world would it have been? Are you thinking of Viscount Holstoy?"

As the two of them discussed Miklotov's suggestion, the councilor turned his quiet gaze on Julius, who sat enveloped in silence.

Someone who would follow Vincent's orders, incite rebellion, and yet retain control of events. Julius had an inkling; he knew someone in just such a position. When he reflected on what had happened, it seemed like an entire chain of improbable happenstances. But the strangest thing of all had been Vincent Volakia's baseless certainty. If one wanted to chalk it up to instinct, then there was nothing more to be said, but what if it wasn't? What if there had, in fact, been a firm foundation for his baseless certainty after all?

"Balleroy Temeglyph."

One of the Nine Divine Generals, and the highest-ranking military officer to join the rebellion against the emperor. It was he, Julius thought, who had been the poison pill the emperor had slipped into the coup.

"____"

Ferris and Reinhard were left speechless when they heard the name Julius offered. They thought about it: the shot that had taken off Vincent's arm. Why the arm? A man of Balleroy's skill targeting a defenseless opponent should easily have been able to take off his head.

"Ferris, I believe your healing abilities were already part of the emperor's calculations… But that last gasp of Balleroy's—that was for real."

The traitorous general had claimed that his motive was revenge against

Reinhard. There had been no lie in those last words of his. Julius was convinced Balleroy had set up the situation the way he did in order to kill Reinhard. Perhaps Vincent had even known of this lust for vengeance and used it to bring Balleroy around to the game he himself wished to play.

"The emperor of Volakia has firm faith in what he has seen, what he has thought, and the belief that Heaven has chosen him. I reiterate: He is a man of consummate rationality, as well as unflinching opportunistic judgment." Miklotov seemed to be indirectly affirming the conclusion Julius had come to. In truth, it was a verdict that shook him to his core. Julius was confident of it after his time with the emperor, brief though it was. Vincent Volakia was a peerless strategist and a superlative ruler, whose ability to calculate and scheme was to be feared. It was he who embodied more than anyone else the way of life of the Holy Volakian Empire.

"*The kingdom itself should be so.* Have you young men had this thought?" Miklotov asked quietly. His question was directed at the three royal guards sitting across from the two elders. He wanted to know what they thought of the Volakian Empire, having observed it firsthand.

"____"

The three responded only with silence. But it was not silence lacking an answer. When Julius glanced to either side of him, at Ferris and Reinhard, he saw no doubt in their eyes. Both of them were already convinced of the answer to that question. There was a core within each of them that would never be shaken. An awareness of their own destinies that they had carried since they were young, an absolute loyalty to the royal line, though extinguished. Unshaking will to follow the person to whom they owed everything, though that person was gone.

Did Julius himself, he wondered, have any such thing in his own life?

"Mmm. I see, I see. Excellent answers, all." The elder across from them smiled, seeming to take the collective silence of the three young men for a response. They were taken aback, but Bordeaux shook his head, a knowing look on his face.

"You never change, Sir Miklotov. I know those eyes of yours can see a lot—maybe too much, sometimes! Just how far ahead did you see this time?"

"Only as much as a man can see when he's too old to quite stand up straight and knows but little life is left to him. One thing I can say is that the buds of the next generation have begun to shoot forth in the kingdom. Mmm.

This was a most significant mission indeed."

Miklotov nodded as if to affirm his own statement, but Bordeaux only looked at him, the crags and crevices of his face deepening in a frown. It was then, listening to the two of them, that Julius understood that he and his friends had not been an incidental part of this envoy from the kingdom. They were the ones recommended to take part from among the members of the royal guard. True, Reinhard had been requested by the empire, but in a broad sense, they were all there for the same reason. The three of them were to experience the empire for themselves, to feel Volakia on their skin.

All the knights present—Reinhard, of course, but Julius and Ferris as well—presumably had long futures ahead of them as members of the royal guard. This was an experience on which they could draw in days to come. Perhaps Vincent had even requested Reinhard's presence specifically to pit him against the Nine Divine Generals…

"Impossible…," Julius said, the word catching in his throat as the possibility dawned on him. Innumerable maneuvers, calculations, and plots lay behind this mission to the Volakian Empire. Vincent certainly had his hand in the events, but what about the kingdom? What part had it played? Could it be that Miklotov himself had known what would happen before they ever left?

"You give me far too much credit, my dear Julius."

He was no longer even shocked when Miklotov seemed able to read his thoughts. The elder smiled calmly, then gazed out the window. Bordeaux likewise gave a thoughtful look, his arms crossed. Evidently, the two councilors had presented all the lessons they were going to give today.

"Watch out, Julius, or those furrows around your eyebrows'll stick!" Ferris said, pointing between his own eyes for emphasis. Julius found he couldn't stay serious in the face of the relaxed cat-boy.

"It seems a great many webs have been woven in the shadows, where we see them not. But I suppose first and foremost, we should be glad that all of us are returning home safely."

"Yeah, that's for sure. Plus, Reinhard finally got to take off the Collar of Submission. How're you doing? Bet it feels great to have that thing off, huh?"

"Yes, wonderful. Like I've been released from the most claustrophobic confinement. I know you've both been worried about me—from now on, I'll be able to move and act freely."

“Confinement or no, you still meownaged to beat Volakia’s strongest fighter—that’s our Reinhard!” Ferris said, and the Sword Saint laughed, turning up the collar of his shirt next to his now-bare neck.

Julius nodded. “Yes, you’re right. Both of you. The pondering can wait until we get home.”

“So you’re still set on pondering? Couldn’t *mew* take it a little easier?”

“Just the way I am,” answered Julius. The other two, knowing their friend would never change, looked at each other and shrugged affably. Julius, for his part, looked out the window of the dragon carriage and up at the sky.

There are no borders up there. The kingdom and the empire may bump up against each other on land, but the blue goes on forever.

“But then, even so…”

There were other borders, invisible ones. Things buried in thoughts or in individuals’ ways of life. He knew now how the empire functioned; he had seen the loneliness of its emperor, discovered the greatness of his strength, and now he was going home to his kingdom.

What kind of kingdom would it be in these coming days? It was a vital question, one that could not go unanswered in a land with no king. And when his country strode forth into that yet unknown future, what benefit would this experience of his be?

“___”

Julius let his thoughts roam as he looked up at the sky. It would not be long until the answer to that question came to him in the form of a meeting with a young woman, an encounter that would set him on the path forward.

The royal selection that would determine the next king of Lugunica—it was only months away now, drawing closer every passing moment.

21

On the same day, at the same time. In the Crystal Palace, in the imperial capital of Lupghana.

“Fine work, you apes.”

At the somber pronouncement, those kneeling slowly looked up. Bowed

respectfully on the red carpet were soldiers without peer in the empire: the Nine Divine Generals. Some were massive, and others had bestial features or looked otherwise inhuman, but all of them bowed to one man in this world: the seventy-seventh emperor of the Holy Volakian Empire, Vincent Volakia.

"___"

Vincent sat on the throne in all his glory, resting his chin on his hands. In his right hand was a metal collar, set with a magic crystal in the center. It was the so-called Collar of Submission, used for binding. It was just one of the metia that could be found not just in the empire, but around the world. But this collar had an added value that made it unique among all metia: It had been around the neck of the Sword Saint.

"Mogro Hagane." Dangling the collar from his fingers, Vincent called one of the Nine forth. In response, a Steelfolk, their body resembling an amalgam of metal and ore, looked up at the emperor. Vincent nodded. Then he turned his gaze to the ceiling of the great room—no, to the entire Crystal Palace. "I grant there were some surprises along the way, but I believe you had the chance to trade blows with the Sword Saint. How many do you think you could take?"

"Two hits. Maybe. Three." The voice could be heard all over the room, almost as though the Crystal Palace itself were pronouncing the answer. No one present reacted to the sound's apparent point of origin, though. That did not mean they weren't surprised—only that it was not the voice that surprised them, but rather, what it had said.

"Three hits…? That's some bullshit. What kinda weapon's that guy usin'?"

"We knew he would be beyond anything we had ever faced. That's exactly why we were able to prepare our trump card. But even so…"

"I think, dangerous. That man, a threat. Eliminate. Priority should be—eliminate."

One general was impressed, another hesitant, and still another concerned. The voices belonged to Groovy, Goz, and Mogro, respectively. In each of their minds stood the obvious, indisputable, and deadly facts about Reinhard van Astrea. Each saw the question of how to deal with the Sword Saint as the most important issue facing them—

"Good heavens, I simply have to wonder if he's really as bad as all that."

This objection came from none of the three who had just spoken their minds. Its source was a man dressed in white from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. It was a shade of alabaster so pale, it looked as if all other color had simply drained away.

He was the only one present who had not encountered the delegation from Lugunica face-to-face. No—that was not quite right. He had encountered them—just not with this current face.

"Exactly what do you mean, Chisha Gold? Are you trying to imply that all of us together could misjudge the threat an enemy poses? If so, then the blame lies partly with you, as well."

"Perish the thought. However, as to whether it would be right for me to accept any blame…"

"Don't play dumb. To act as His Majesty's body double in times of peace, only to refuse when it's most necessary of all—your insolence is unbelievable… Imagine if something had happened to the sovereign!"

"Such a thing is beyond imagining. Unless *you* are professing a lack of faith in His Majesty's discernment and wisdom."

The man in white—Chisha Gold—ended up locking eyes with the increasingly irate Goz. For sheer size, there was no comparison, but they were almost the same in height. Now as they both knelt, they could conduct this staring contest from only inches apart.

"Enough. You sound like two dogs at a bone. It was my decision. If you have an objection, voice it to me personally."

The standoff was ended by the very person who had inspired it: the emperor himself. Goz snapped his head back down respectfully. "Your Majesty!" he exclaimed. "If this plan was indeed of your own design, then it has my full support! I, Goz Ralphone, shall stake my very life on—"

"That's enough of your twittering. Shut your mouth."

"____"

Ordered silent for the third time that day, Goz ceased speaking, but an audible grinding of teeth could be heard. Once Vincent was satisfied, Chisha addressed him. "Your Majesty, allow me to tender my profound appreciation. However, I myself was most terrified, may I say. I never considered that the loss of your arm might be part of the act. Had I but known…"

"You would have reconsidered trading places with me as my body double?"

"…Most likely. Not to say I'm in any hurry to get my own arm blown off," Chisha replied diffidently, putting a hand to his chin.

Vincent made a sound in his throat. By the time the generals realized it was the emperor's laughter, he had already continued to speak. "As I said, it was a necessary price. Without it, peace with the kingdom could not have been bought. In any event, there seems every chance that feral beast-boy would have noticed the difference between you and I."

"And for that reason, Your Majesty, you gambled with your life?"

"Hence, why I told the man not to aim for the heart or the head. It seems that was enough."

"As you say, Your Majesty." Chisha put a hand to his own chest, bowing his head deeply. With that, the exchange between the emperor and his body double was concluded.

"Hey, Your Majesty, I gotta ask… If ya didn't even tell Chisha here, does that mean you're the only one who knew everything that was goin' on? Mogro and I didn't hear shit about what was gonna happen…"

"You and Mogro knew twenty percent. The contemptible Chisha, fifty. The silent Goz there, ten percent. And as for that blustering, undisciplined, disrespectful *thing*, zero."

"Cecils, commotion. Even now." An uncharacteristic word of sympathy came from Mogro. The strongest man in the empire had not even been summoned to this audience. The Blue Lightning of Volakia had been entirely ignorant of anything that was going on. Though, it was not because the emperor didn't trust him.

"That *thing* has his own way of life. Faced with the right enemy, he will give his all and then some. I seek nothing more than that of him."

"Hey, hey, if the whole point was for him to *win*, then—"

"He lost once. It will not happen again. Under any other circumstances, I would not even furnish him with a second chance to be defeated." Vincent, his chin still in his hands, pulled his lips back. The predatory grin told Groovy and Mogro everything. Even Cecils's defeat had been foreseen by the emperor.

Volakia's strongest fighter, who had never known anything but victory, had tasted loss in his battle with the Sword Saint from the Kingdom of Lugunica. Such an experience would forge Cecils Segmund into a swordsman the equal of Reinhard van Astrea.

“The collar… The rebellion… The defeat of my strongest…” If all this had truly been within the purview of the emperor’s plans, then words failed at the profundity of his thinking. But even in the face of all this, why? Why risk his own life? “All simply to improve the chance of success.”

He had ruthlessly treated his own life as one of the cards he held in his hand. That was Vincent Volakia’s strength; indeed, it was the very ideal of the Volakian emperor.

“____”

Vincent blinked an eye at his servants, who trembled with awe at the man. Emperor Vincent only ever closed one eye at a time. Without at least one open to watch at every moment, who knew when someone might come to claim his life? That was what it meant to be at the apex of this empire. And as he sat there, exercising a caution that was now second nature to him, Vincent pondered. He thought about the question Groovy had asked, and the deliberately misleading answer he had given.

The demi-human general had asked if anyone had known everything. The emperor had not responded with the whole truth. And why not?

“Fine work, Balleroy Temeglyph.” To the warrior who had honored his trust to the end, taking all the blame upon himself, the emperor uttered words of praise inaudible to anyone else. He even felt the slightest twinge of regret that Balleroy’s fervent wish had not been fulfilled. How good it would have been if all had gone precisely according to his calculations, as the Divine Generals cowering before him believed. It brought a smile to Vincent’s face, a smile no one saw.

Magic words once spoken by a master of the “world” whom Vincent had known: “*This world is made to favor you.* Hmm.”

<END>

RECORD OF THE DAYS BEFORE THE ROYAL SELECTION – THE SILVER FLOWER DANCE OF THE SWORD SAINT AND THE LIGHTNING

1

There is a weapon called the Dragon Sword.

Renowned blades there are in the world, but none more famous than it.
Sacred blades there are in the world, but none more holy than it.
Enchanted blades there are in the world, but none more magical than it.

It is held to be the strongest, the sharpest, and the most beautiful in all the land.
Such is this heirloom of the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica—the Dragon Sword Reid.

It is said to be an enchanted blade that has drunk the blood of the thousands of dragons it butchered.
It is said to be a sacred blade, bearing a blessing bestowed by the Sword God himself.
It is said to be a blade thoroughly honed, forged by an anonymous swordsmith, and the finest steel tempered by the finest skill.

The Dragon Sword wants nothing for tales and legends, but the truth of its history remains obscure.
Only one thing is certain.

The Dragon Sword Reid is the strongest in the world, and the same is expected to be true of its wielder.

Thus, only the Sword Saint may take the Dragon Sword in hand, and only the most fitting enemies may ever behold it.

Once the Dragon Sword is drawn, defeat is no longer an option.

Only this truth, so extraordinary it seems a legend itself, comes down to us, in a line unbroken from antiquity.

2

It was another day on the border between the kingdom and the empire, and the watchman in the guardhouse was bored, again.

"Yawwwn…" The young man put a hand to his mouth, unsuccessfully trying to stifle a yawn. It actually made tears come to his eyes. If the royal army of Lugunica was a ladder, he was at the very bottom of it. A foot soldier. What's more, it was evident that he was not overflowing with motivation and morale. Even any particular commitment to the task the man had been given seemed too much to hope for.

He owed his position as a guardsman to his parents' connections, and his lack of drive was not lost on his superiors, nor neglected in their reports. Hence, he found himself relegated to this guardhouse, a place whose importance turned out to be purely nominal.

Relations between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Volakian Empire had never been warm, not in the thousand years and more since the two nations had been founded. The history books were littered with their territorial skirmishes. Perhaps that made the presence of such an irresponsible young lout on the border seem strange…

"Yep… No war today, either," the young man remarked, gazing out from the observation tower at the clouds as they drifted by. He felt no more urgency than those indifferent denizens of the great, blue sky, and why should he? The last time battles had broken out between the kingdom and the empire with any frequency had been centuries ago; there hadn't been any engagements worth mentioning for decades. The watchman's role as a border

guard was as simple as jobs got, and in the months since he had been assigned to this position, his daily reports had all consisted of the same two words: *All quiet*. In fact, in order to save himself the trouble of having to produce a fresh report each day, the layabout had already prepared reports reading *All quiet* for the entirety of next month.

In fairness, it seemed there had been some trouble in the capital the last several months, but it meant little to him out here on the frontier. It seemed an unreasonable burden for him even to read the written orders he was sent from the capital city, and for the most part, he simply skimmed them. There was just one thing that had registered with him.

"'Increase vigilance regarding the Volakian Empire.' Yeah, but *how*?"

It wasn't like they were sending the man anyone new to help at the checkpoint, so it wasn't clear to him how he was supposed to implement these orders. A more dedicated colleague had suggested redoubling the watch, but with the men they had on hand, they could barely maintain the watch schedule they already had. So here he was today, watching, just as vigilant as ever, and no more.

"Hmm…?" The young man suddenly glanced down from the clouds toward the roadway, frowning. At first, he thought he must be seeing things. However, the guard's doubts quickly turned to prayers. Then from prayers to wishes—and then within a few seconds, all hopes were dashed.

A tremendous dust cloud was approaching the checkpoint directly down the road from the empire. It moved almost too fast to believe, as if a land dragon were running with all its speed. No, even faster than that. As the young man watched, frozen, the source of the dust cloud cut across his view, heading into kingdom territory. The thing simply barreled straight past the checkpoint.

"Whoa! H-hey, wait…!"

This was a border outpost. Vetting anyone traveling from one side of the line to the other was a big part of the job. And yet this whirlwind hadn't so much as stopped to acknowledge the outpost, instead speeding right by. That was an unauthorized border crossing, clearly a crime. But—

"Heeeey, time to change the guard!"

"Huh?" Taken by surprise, the young man found the dust cloud had grown too distant to see. He was more startled still by the voice of one of his comrades, who was climbing up the ladder from below. He turned back to

see his more diligent companion, who stared at the pale boy.

"Oh…," he said.

"What's with the look? Wait… Did something happen?"

"No, uh, er…" The young man was at a loss to respond. Had something happened? Yes. But it was also a fact that he had been unable to do anything about it. If he reported that he had simply let an identified intruder waltz by, he assumed he could expect much worse than just an assignment to some godforsaken corner of the frontier. The fear silenced him for a long moment. Finally, he managed, "…Nah, nothing. Nothing at all. Same old boring world out there."

In the end, the lazy guardsman never mentioned what he had seen, not to his comrade and not in his written report. The record would show that on this day at the border between the kingdom and the empire, absolutely nothing had happened.

A small digression: Some months later, this young border guard was turned in by his comrade for false reporting and dereliction of duty. He was then reassigned to guard a jail instead—but that is a story for another time.

3

The pair in their snappy, white uniforms caught the attention of everyone on the street.

Walking down the shopping thoroughfare in the commoners' district of the capital city of Lugunica was a handsome man, looking cool and elegant. He was joined by a young woman as beautiful as a blooming flower—a couple of rare loveliness. What's more, both of them were knights of the kingdom, judging by their uniforms. The white cloaks they wore symbolized their status as members of the royal guard, an elite group of the most skilled and highly trained knights in the country.

However, only one of the two consistently considered this the ultimate source of pride for a knight. At the moment, the other half of the couple was walking with hands clasped behind, thin shoulders bouncing merrily.

" *Royal guard* sounds like a nice title, but it turns out to be surprisingly boring meowst of the time, doesn't it?" The speaker, looking around with wide eyes, was the flaxen-haired, cat-eared healer. A young woman—or at

least, someone who looked like one. It was Ferris.

Ferris stretched out his arms, hands still clasped, and stifled a yawn.

"Staying loose is well and good, but yawning? You're getting a bit *too* relaxed. And I question that remark about it being 'boring,' too. It behooves us to conduct ourselves in such a way that will not bring shame upon this uniform." This scolding came from the handsome young man who was walking beside Ferris and had by no means missed the cat-boy's battle with his yawn.

"Oh, you saw that, huh?" Ferris said, sticking out his tongue. "Fine, I give. You've got eyes like a hawk, Julius. Don't you ever get tired, watching everything so closely?"

"It's part of my job—*our* job. And anyway, our boredom is good news for the people."

"Only you could recite a slogan like that and really mean it." Ferris shrugged his slender shoulders, smiling wryly at his partner's vigilance. In response, Julius allowed himself a smile that only his friends ever saw.

As it happened, the two of them were patrolling the capital on a public-safety round. The royal guard spent much of its time cooped up in the castle. However, routes like this, inspecting the capital firsthand and helping to prevent any crime, proved another important role for them. The pair's knightly uniforms stood out even at a distance; two of them walking together would hopefully instill a deterrent effect simply by their presences.

"I feel like a scarecrow in a field. But I guess Ferri and his friend have one thing up on a scarecrow—we can walk around! And we're better-looking!"

"There are those who would stay their hand in the vicinity of a knight, attractive or not. That gives meaning to what we're doing… Ah, not that I'm denying your good looks."

"Aren't you so diligent and capable? Ferri can feel his heart racing!"

"If it's joy that causes your heart to race, then it seems you feel much the same thing as I do in conversing with you."

"Ooh, scary. Not the same way as Reinhard or the captain, though." Ferris scratched a cheek in embarrassment, his cat eyes darting this way and that.

Julius and Ferris had known each other since the latter's admission to the ranks of the knights, which was still not even a year ago now. Despite the brevity of their acquaintance, though, they had become fast friends, closer

than they were to many of their other colleagues. They got along well, of course, but Julius felt the real driver of their friendship was the fact that they respected each other. The spirit mage had great admiration for those who could do what he could not, as well as others who spared no effort to better themselves. It was the same way he felt about Reinhard.

"Still, I suppose my respect for Reinhard is a beast of a slightly different color."

"Hmm? Did *mew* say something?"

"No—I was just thinking, the marketplace seems rife with rumors of the royal family. I doubt it will be long before the royal selection becomes common knowledge. It seems neither wall nor door can truly keep one's words from getting out."

"…Yeah, guess you're right." Ferris sounded just a little more downbeat after Julius changed the subject.

The rumors currently on all the lips in the capital had to do with the extinction of the Lugunican royal lineage. Official word from the castle was that the king, Randohal Lugunica, was bedridden with illness but recovering. In point of fact, however, he was already dead, and the same illness that had claimed him had also killed every other person of royal blood in the kingdom. The result was that the entire ruling bloodline had been completely snuffed out.

No one knew where the information was coming from, but regardless, most of what floated around the marketplace contained a startling amount of truth, and it wasn't uncommon to hear many a voice lamenting the future of the nation. Flush with anxiety, a handful of people had already approached the two royal guardsmen.

Perhaps that's why we're here.

Marcus, the captain of the royal guard, was not only a brave man-at-arms in his own right, but an astute thinker, attentive to this sort of detail.

"The captain's wisdom never fails to impress me. The royal selection is rumored to start soon, and I doubt we will be able to avoid getting involved. Especially you, Ferris, my friend."

"Mmm, mew've got that right. Ferri won't stop at anything to help Lady Crusch!" The slight demi-human clenched a fist, his sweet features drawing tight with determination.

Although he was a sworn knight of the guard, Ferris's formal allegiance

was to Duchess Crusch Karsten. The duchess, regarded as one of the most talented women in the land, had been chosen as one of the candidates for the so-called royal selection, which would determine the next king of Lugunica. Once all five candidates were assembled, it would be incumbent on Ferris to support his lady as her first knight.

"Duchess Crusch Karsten…" Julius knew of her, though only in passing. She was a widely applauded genius of high ideals. The purple-haired man could certainly sympathize with the woman's position, as she succeeded to the head of a prominent noble estate at such a young age and was now poised with the future of the kingdom potentially on her shoulders. Without a doubt, she was the most qualified candidate for the kingship. Beyond that, Crusch and Ferris had both kept close ties to the former royal family; the throne doubtlessly held no small importance to either of them.

Their passions must be equal to their histories. As Ferris's friend, Julius had nothing but admiration for the cat-boy's dedication to his mistress. Yet there remained a shadow of doubt, like a thorn prickling his heart.

Julius repressed the sensation. "Just be mindful not to exhaust yourself. Too much dedication can be a poison of its own. Remember to care for yourself as well."

"Yeah, yeah. Julius, mew're such a worrywart." Ferris sounded no more bothered than usual.

"I knew you would say that. But still, as your friend—" Julius cut off his words midsentence.

"…? What's up?" Ferris looked at him, puzzled. Julius seemed fixated on a bustling restaurant across the street, or perhaps it was something inside. The building was characteristic of the many other little establishments on the shopping boulevard, featuring a cramped interior with just a counter and a few tables to sit at. There were only a handful of customers; it was already too late in the day for lunch. However, one of the patrons stood out, though their back was to the knights. This person wore a short jacket dyed bright blue; their indigo hair was tied back behind their head. Underneath the jacket, they wore an unusual outfit called a kimono, the customary dress of the people of Kararagi. On this person's feet were a kind of sandal called zori, which hailed from the same place as the kimono.

If that had been all, this person might have been just another distinctively clad traveler. But there was more.

“Huh…? Isn’t that—?” Ferris’s eyes went wide as he noticed the young man Julius was looking at. The spirit mage didn’t respond, for he was simply too shocked.

At the person’s waist hung two swords—it was unmistakably the distinctive appearance of someone who sought swords as prizes. Yet Julius wished it was a mistake, for it was too astonishing to see that person here.

“Ahhh! Now, *that* was a meal. My goodness, the food in the capital is ever so satisfying!” The young man nodded pleasantly, setting his empty bowl on the counter without ever noticing the two utterly stunned knights watching him.

“Very kind of you to say so, sir,” the clerk replied, pleased to see the empty bowl and the gusto with which the traveler had eaten. “Don’t often see a lad wolf down his food quite like that. Take it you were pleased?”

“And then some! I might say the quantity was a tad stingy, but the flavor more than made up for it. I’m used to big, bold flavors, so all the little details of kingdom cooking are a treat for my mouth.” The young man reached into his kimono for his purse as he shared this amicable conversation with the clerk.

The clerk’s eyes went wide when he saw the copper coin the blue-haired man had given him.

“Huh? Hey, mister, this—”

“Ah, I’m certain I don’t have any foreign currency left in my purse, so don’t worry if it’s a bit too much. Frankly, it would probably be worth less if I kept it, and I so rarely get to feel this way. Look at you, making money!” The young man stood from his seat, smiling at the flabbergasted shopkeeper. He gathered up the smattering of belongings at his feet and was about to leave with the same breezy confidence when…

“Oh?”

He noticed two pairs of eyes on him and stopped. The young, sword-bearing man traded stares with Julius and Ferris for a long moment, clearly in thought, then clapped his hands. “I remember now! Yes, you’re those slightly amazing people who managed to escape me alive!”

Julius and Ferris exchanged a look at hearing the young man’s voice so enthusiastic and at seeing his eyes so bright. The man in the kimono waved to them and sauntered over as if greeting his best friends.

“Hello, hello, long time no see! The Blue Lightning of Volakia, Cecils

Segmund, appears before you once again!"

Cecils stood there with a completely earnest smile. The empire's strongest fighter had evidently come to the kingdom uninvited, unchallenged, and completely unconcerned.

4

Cecils Segmund, the young man in the odd blue outfit, was one of the most powerful warriors of the Holy Volakian Empire.

In the man's homeland, some warriors were accorded the rank of general, including general third-class, general second-class, and general first-class. Of those in this top rank, general first-class, there were only nine, and they were known as the Nine Divine Generals. Cecils himself was foremost among this group, and without question the most powerful fighter in the empire. That also made him a menace to the kingdom that could not be ignored. Just as Reinhard had been subjected to onerous bureaucratic vetting and harsh limitations on his freedoms when he had visited the empire, Cecils should have been subject to much the same wariness on the part of the kingdom. And yet here he was.

"It's an honor to meet you again, Master Cecils. But when did you arrive in the kingdom, if I may ask? Perhaps it's simply above our station to be notified, but we hadn't heard of any Volakian visitors of importance arriving…"

"Oh my goodness, no, don't worry about it. It's not a failure of the old report-relay-review. I just decided to show up here—didn't report to or review with anyone!"

"Ah. I see." Julius had been trying to wheedle an answer out of Cecils, but he hadn't expected that response. The knight wasn't sure how to react.

Julius had moved them off the main road, with its many eyes, to a little tea shop he knew. They wouldn't be quite so widely observed here, though he'd had to drag Cecils, overjoyed at their unexpected reunion, almost by force. Now the interloper was calmly drinking some black tea, looking around the shop with curiosity and peppering the staff with questions about the exact varieties of tea leaves they used. Julius and Ferris watched him silently.

"What do we do?"

"First, we see what he's up to."

This conversation took place entirely with their eyes.

They had, after all, run into a first-rank general of the empire while explicitly out on patrol in the capital. The two of them felt a little guilty, considering how pleased Cecils seemed to be to see them, but both of them were deeply conflicted. And when they discovered that his visit was unofficial, they started to hope this would all turn out to be some sort of nightmare. Thus, the retreat into the tea shop—and into the seats farthest from the door, in hopes of taking matters in hand as quickly as possible.

"Oh, you don't have to look quite so panicked. I haven't come to do the kingdom any harm," Cecils said with no hesitation, as if reading their minds.

"——" Neither Julius nor Ferris said anything.

"Do you really imagine that I, Cecils Segmund, would engage in base property destruction or assassination, even if His Majesty the Emperor ordered me to? Please, I'm above such underhanded methods. You can set your minds at ease."

"Um… Even if Emperor Vincent ordered you?" Ferris's voice was hard, his guard up, but Cecils could not have been more comfortable.

"It would be such a blow to my reputation, to say nothing of my pride. If I'm reduced to that kind of skulking around, I might as well be dead. And I don't intend to die anytime soon." Cecils sat easily in his chair, sipping his tea with no hint of hostility. He had removed his swords, which were now leaning against the back wall—his way of demonstrating his good intentions, perhaps. At the very least, he didn't seem set on causing any trouble.

"…Very well, then, let's go back a step. You say your presence here is *not* at the behest of the empire?"

"Never even asked—His Majesty and friends would have only made things so much more complicated. And I've heard it's just a nightmare, the paperwork you have to do to cross the border. I seem to remember what a headache you all had coming to our place, no?"

"But you should have been subject to the same—Wait, don't tell me you forced your way in?"

"Nothing so outrageous. I just ran from my side of the border to yours, going as fast as I could the whole way. I really would have stopped if anyone had told me to."

Julius tried his best to curtail the frown that crossed his face at this rather

overly honest response. Cecils claimed to have simply bypassed the border checkpoint. It was no lie, nor any joke, but most probably a simple statement of the truth. He wasn't called The Blue Lightning of Volakia for no reason: He had the speed to match such a title. It was no little trick or fancy footwork to make himself look quicker than he was; he could genuinely move fast enough to defy human senses. To the men at the guard post, he had likely looked no different from a passing breeze.

"——" Julius thought back to his encounter with Cecils in Volakia. It had taken all his strength and skill simply to defend himself from Cecils's swordsmanship. Thanks to the intervention of a third party, he had left the encounter with his head and body still attached to each other, but if the fight hadn't been interrupted, there was a good chance that right now… And that was when Julius got a hunch about why the kimono-wearing man was visiting.

"Could it be that the real reason you've come here, Master Cecils…?"

"I don't suppose you'd believe it's just for sightseeing?" Cecils smiled wryly at the spirit mage's change in demeanor.

Ferris, also in full view of the foreigner's grin, pursed his lips. "*Meow*, we wouldn't," he offered. "Though, we'd sure appreciate if that were true… Eh, unfortunately, even Ferri kind of figured it wasn't."

"Ah-ha-ha, so even the lovely cat-eared lady has seen through me. How embarrassing. But men have their principles—I wouldn't blame the young lady for not understanding." Cecils scratched his cheek in embarrassment. Ever since their first meeting, he had been under an ongoing misconception about Ferris's gender, but this didn't seem like the moment to correct him.

"Reinhard van Astrea," Cecils said brusquely. He gazed at the tea in his cup for a moment, then continued, "It's a source of great pain to all of us, myself included, that we were unable to offer him appropriate hospitality on his recent visit to the empire. I come with apologies from the bottom of my heart."

"And what, you're here to make it all better? Color Ferri meowy skeptical." It was a mixture of exasperation, sarcasm, and plain, simple suspicion of a very dangerous man who had shown up unexpectedly. Such an openly hostile attitude was a risk when dealing with Volakia's strongest fighter, but at least there was no question that he meant what he said. Ferris stood head and shoulders above the rest of the royal healers, had taken care

of many patients as The Blue, and, furthermore, was a knight with a responsibility to support his candidate for the kingship. He could never welcome any seed of trouble from outside the country, no matter how affable they might be.

Ferris stared daggers at Cecils, but the visitor adopted a self-deprecating smile. "It's very much as you say, my cat-eared beauty. I myself admit to the most appalling of behavior and fully grant that I deserve only your suspicion. However—"

"'However,' what?"

"—I may be rotten, but I remain the greatest of Volakia's Nine Divine Generals. My complete and utter failure to overcome your Sword Saint bears directly on the authority of my nation. If I can't expunge my dishonor of the other day, it will shake the very foundations of the empire. Consider it a proxy battle between the empire and the kingdom." The swordsman spoke calmly, politely, and eloquently. But if one were to ask whether his words showed understanding and acumen, they most assuredly did not. Cecils's mind was made up, and although his thoughts were bent on violence, it was understandable. "I'm very much aware of how much weight I bear on these shoulders of mine. You two Knights of the Royal Guard must feel much the same. The color of what we carry may be different, but the substance is nearly identical."

"I understand what you're saying, Master Cecils. But I must wonder why we concluded a nonaggression pact, if you and Reinhard were simply going to have a 'proxy battle.'"

"Oops, I'm afraid perhaps you don't understand. My suggestion is merely a fight to settle things. Any taking of life is secondary." It seemed a bit of a counterintuitive point. "He and I both have our places in our respective nations. Though, I confess it would be quite a thrill to conduct a battle with our two countries riding on us, like the Silver Flower Dance of Pictat."

"You're referring to the battle between the Sword Devil and Eight-Arms, almost forty years ago?"

"I think the highest heights of swordsmanship at the time had much in common with what we do now. How I would love to talk with the Sword Devil someday! You wouldn't happen to know him, would you?"

The Blue Lightning of Volakia was obviously bursting with curiosity, but Ferris and Julius both looked at him flatly. Did Julius know this swordsman,

the Sword Devil, personally? Not so. But neither could it be said that they were completely and utterly unrelated to each other, for one of Julius's friends was a blood relative of the man.

Ferris, however, seeking to prevent further derailment of the conversation, clapped his hands and said, "All right, all right. We don't know this Sword Devil, and we don't want to know him—sounds like a problem waiting to happen—and anyway, we're getting off subject! Why are you so set on battling Reinhard?"

"…I must say, I agree with Ferris. My swordsmanship is quite underdeveloped compared with yours, Master Cecils, but even to my untutored eye, your chances of victory seem—"

"Hey, now, planning to challenge me yourself before the big day? Just so you know, the shortness of my temper is so notorious in the empire that it's even come up in the Imperial Parliament."

"Yeah, must be pretty embarrassing when the empire's strongest fighter can't pass up an insult."

Cecils's tone had remained light, but Julius and Ferris looked at him sharply. "Hmm," he said, crossing his arms, as if their gazes had gotten through to him. "Not to toot my own horn, but I've never encountered a fight that *really* pushed me to my limits."

"——" Neither of them responded.

"Surpassing intelligence and overwhelming physical ability are one within me. Truly, is such a being *not* destined to take the lead role? The Sword Saint is the first wall, you might say, that I've encountered. And walls can't be avoided."

"Why?"

"Is it that confusing?" Cecils responded, appearing genuinely perplexed. "A character can't run from the challenges of his story."

This view of himself as an actor, forever standing on life's stage, was hard for most people to fathom. Julius nonetheless narrowed his eyes when he saw how natural and comfortable Cecils appeared to be. There was an alienation there, one he sometimes felt toward his friends, colleagues, and even superiors, mingled with an envy toward *something* Julius was certain he didn't have.

"Very well. I understand what you're saying."

"Excellent! That's the nature of a bond born from trading blows! Two

people really can understand each other after that!"

"However, my position being what it is, I can hardly just look the other way while you run free, Master Cecils. I will have to report this to the castle, after which I believe it will be in the best interests of both our nations for you to return home."

"It turns out you didn't understand me at all!" wailed the man in the kimono. If his presence was indeed reported to the knights' garrison, he would certainly not avoid deportation. Though, Julius felt bad for him. This was partly the result of Cecils's station, after all.

"Huh! If that's how it's to be, I suppose I'll have to cut you down to shut you up, find the Sword Saint for myself, and—"

"However, I *might* see my way to entertaining your request, with conditions," Julius continued, interrupting the Volakian general before he could finish what would have been a very troublesome threat.

"Julius?!" Cecils was dumbfounded, while Ferris shook his friend by the shoulders. The cat-boy's face was pale. "Have you lost your mind?! You're actually going to listen to this nutty idea?!"

"I'm afraid I can't speak to the state of my own sanity, but my suggestion, at least, is serious. Besides, if we act too obstinate, the possibility remains that Cecils will simply dispose of us and go on with his quest."

"——!" Ferris nearly choked, although his fellow knight sounded calm. When Julius glanced at Cecils, he saw he had edged closer to where his swords leaned against the wall.

"Heavens," Cecils said, "I have no intention whatsoever of such overt violence. But…would you really consider my request?"

"As I said, there would be conditions. If you can follow them, then…"

"Tell me," Cecils said, sitting up straighter as he registered that Julius was indeed serious.

Julius held up three fingers. "First, you are not to turn your sword upon any citizen of the kingdom other than Reinhard."

"But of course."

"Second, if by chance your presence should become known to the knights, you are to respectfully turn yourself in and submit to their judgment, even if it results in you being ejected from the country."

"And if I accept this condition, will you not simply run to your unit and alert them to me?"

"You'll have to trust that my pride is as dear to me as yours is to you, Master Cecils."

"…Fair enough. How can I object when you put it that way? Indeed, I admire it." The Volakian agreed to Julius's second condition with a battle-hungry smile. "I accept without further protest. If that's all it takes to wash the humiliation from my name, it's a small price to pay."

"And finally…return to your empire alive. If you were to die, it would truly mean war."

"Ha-ha-ha, yes, I see. Ahh, you do know how to taunt a man." Cecils, who himself had confessed to being easily provoked, frowned at this last condition. But then quite immediately, the mood of the Divine General changed, and he downed his remaining tea in one gulp. "I shall answer all with my sword, including your little tease. Is that all your conditions?"

"Yes. As long as you will hold to them."

"Indeed, so I shall! Guide me forth, then. To my most perfect opponent, the Sword Saint!"

Having heard and accepted the conditions, Cecils bounded to his feet. He returned his beloved swords to their usual position at his hip, and then he turned eager eyes on Julius, who nodded deeply.

"Master Cecils, before I guide you to where you wish to go, I have something very important to say."

"And what would that be? My fervor is already at its greatest extremity, and I wish to go forth to my battle before it should wither or ebb!"

"The issue is Reinhard. He isn't in the capital right now."

"Huh?" The Volakian's mouth fell open so wide, it seemed his jaw might drop off.

"Reinhard's meowy busy, being the Sword Saint. Right now, he's off in the northern part of the kingdom, accompanying some kind of expedition. He'll probably be back…what would you say, next week?" Ferris put a finger to his lips in thought.

"B-b-but that means…" Cecils stared despairingly at the ceiling. "That means I'll have to put off our fight *again*! I can't *stand* it!" This was the second time they had heard such whining from the empire's strongest, and perhaps unluckiest, fighter.

That was hardly something to brag about, though—Julius and Ferris both just shrugged.

5

The capital city of Lugunica was divided into five broad "layers."

The uppermost layer, at the very center of the city, was the royal castle of Lugunica itself. Positioned on a height to allow sweeping views of the city, only the most important nobles as well as the members of the Council of Elders were permitted to reside there. Next came the noble quarter. It was filled to the brim with those of the nobility who were permitted to have houses in the capital. This portion of the city was furnished with the main homes of the lesser nobles and the villas of their superiors, making the place a picture of elegance.

Below the noble quarter came the merchant district, which contributed much to the bustle of the capital, and farther down came the commoners' district, where more than half the capital's population resided. Finally, there were the poorer quarters, where the destitute dwelled. Such places were relegated to corners of the commoners' district or tucked in by the walls that protected the city.

Julius's home was in the noble quarter. The Juukuliuses were of middling noble status, their reserve and uprightness being their defining traits. However…

"Oh me, oh my, what a lovely house. I think I can expect to be very comfortable here!"

That aloofness was shattered by a particularly loud-voiced guest. Cecils, looking at the front hall as he came in through the main door, seemed thoroughly pleased. He glanced this way and that, his eyes lighting on the servants, all of them much surprised by this unexpected visitor. "Oh! Even the maidservants' uniforms look different around here! Lugunican women never forget their elegance, even when they're just serving girls! Ahh, it brings a tear to my eye. Wonderful, most wonderful!"

"Th-thank you for your kind praise, sir. It's an honor…"

Cecils nodded emphatically. "They even answer me with civility and modesty! Such deference makes the heart leap! Though, I confess, I still believe that cat-eared lass is the greatest beauty in all of Lugunica." Then he remembered Julius, whom he had left standing at the door, and went flying back to him. "Goodness, what am I doing, leaving the master of the house

behind? I was simply overwhelmed—please resume guiding me."

"I appreciate your consideration, Master Cecils. But surely, a house of this scale is not such a surprise to you? I'm sure you've seen serving girls before."

"Yes, well, of course, my own stipend is not inconsiderable…but I do spend much of it on my own amusements. That leaves me with rather precarious finances, hardly enough to hire maids." The foreign swordsman gave a dejected shake of his sleeves, and Julius raised an eyebrow. What "amusement" could cost so much money that it left the empire's greatest combatant with so little money?

"As it happens, I collect swords both ancient and new from around the world," Cecils explained. "That way, I always have a prop ready to go—it's my one vice."

"So you collect blades. I see; that makes sense…," Julius said, nodding, as his gaze wandered to the two swords at Cecils's hip. One was in a red scabbard, the other in blue, and he had wondered about them from the moment the men had been reunited in the merchant quarter. It was in no small part because both the blades seemed to radiate an immense cruelty and bloodlust that could still be detected even when they were completely sheathed. This staggering sense of power was proof that these were enchanted or holy blades, nothing ordinary or average.

"The most exceptional pieces in my collection are my number one sword, Murasame, and my number two sword, Masayume. I never had a chance to show them to you back in the empire, but both are enchanted blades with long and storied histories."

"A hobby that has some practical benefit, I see. That's very informative."

"Yes, but acquiring them takes a great deal of money, to say nothing of maintaining them. Not that I've ever begrudged it." As the overpowering aura of the swords threatened to swallow up their owner, Cecils used his own fighter's spirit to suppress the force emanating from the two weapons. To wield such impressive tools demanded an equally impressive owner. Julius touched his knight's blade and wondered whether he would be capable of such a thing. His sword had a history itself as a prized heirloom of the Juukulius household. How long he had spent mastering it, learning to use it to the utmost…

"Sir, would you be a visitor?"

The question came from a young man who emerged from inside the house, interrupting their conversation. The young man's fine facial features gave a soft impression.

"My," Cecils said, raising an eyebrow as the young man approached. "Now here is one who seems to vaguely resemble you, Master Julius…"

"My younger brother, Joshua. Joshua, this is Master Cecils. He will be staying with us for a few days as my guest. I apologize for the lack of warning…"

"I understand. A friend of my brother's is a friend of this household." The purple-haired young man, Joshua Juukulius, smiled faintly and bowed his head.

"Goodness gracious," Cecils said, shaking his head at being received so politely. "I offer my humblest apologies for such sudden imposition. I'm a very poor planner, you see, and didn't think to reserve an inn for my little trip. Master Julius here was so kind as to ask if he could help… You have quite a fine older brother, Master Joshua; I'm almost jealous!"

"So you understand, sir?! You see what a wonderful person my older brother is!"

"Ahem?!"

Julius's younger brother leaned toward Cecils, who had offered a somewhat accurate explanation of the circumstances in lieu of a proper greeting. Joshua, his demeanor having suddenly and completely changed, quite ignored the foreign guest as he passionately clenched his hands into elegant fists.

After a moment, the slim young man continued talking to Cecils with a more familiar tone. "If you're such a fine judge of character as to see my brother for who he is, then I welcome you with open arms. Please stay as long as you like. Master Cecils, where do you come from? That strange outfit, is it not a kimono from Kararagi? I know them from books, but I've never seen one with my own eyes before!"

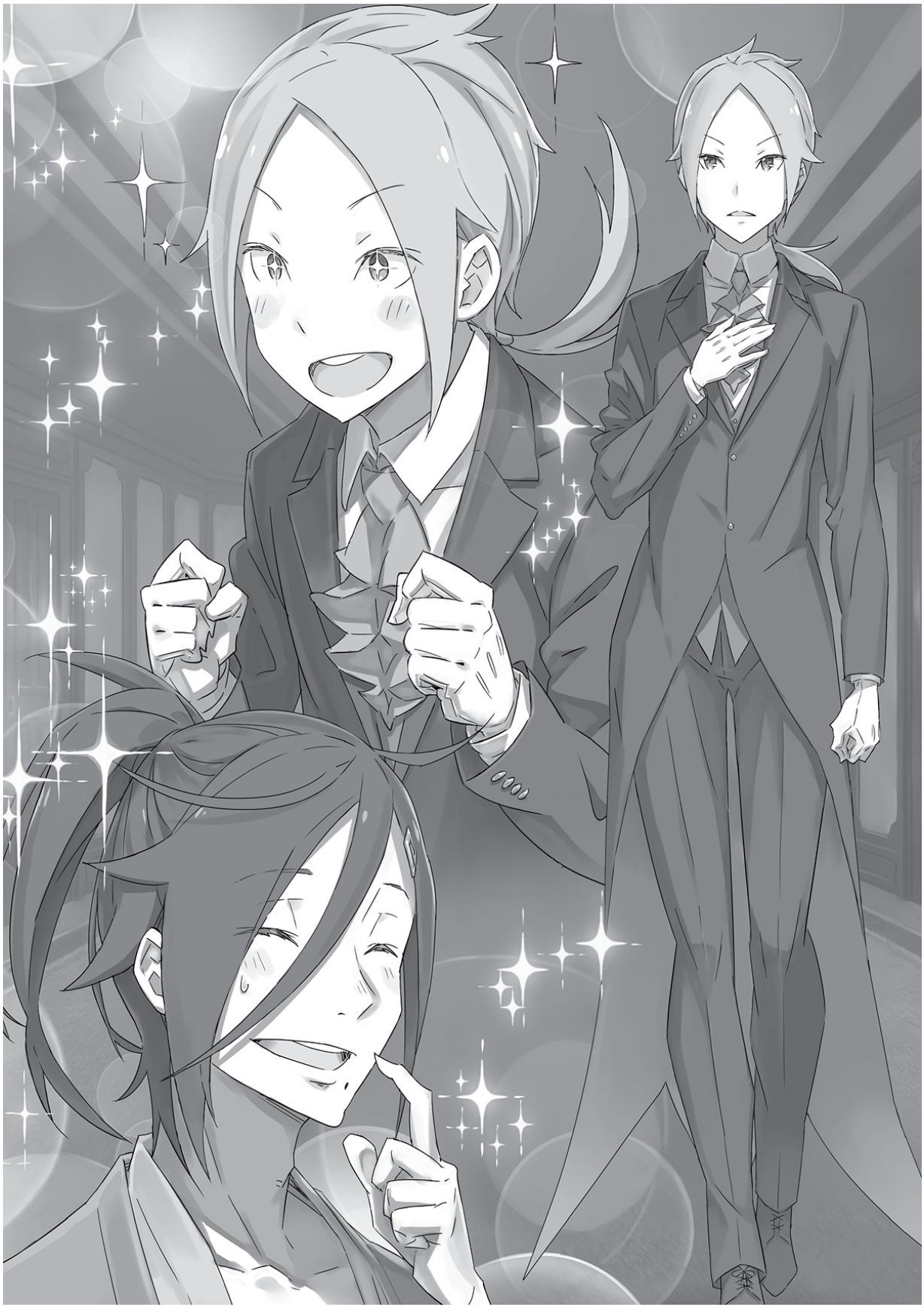
"Ah, so you recognize this? I fell in love with it at first sight on my first trip to Kararagi. I had one custom-made for me after that. A lead actor must be diligent about his appearance, you know. Such is what The Blue Lightning is determined to be and to do!"

"The Blue Lightning…?" That brought Joshua to a halt, interrupting the fine momentum the conversation had been building.

Julius noticed and coughed pointedly. “Joshua, Master Cecils is tired from traveling. We should let him rest in the guest room before anything else.”

“Oh… Yes, of course. I’m sorry, Elder Brother. I got a little excited…” Joshua scratched his cheek and blushed, embarrassed to have forgotten himself. Julius smiled tightly at his younger brother, then turned to Cecils. “Apologies for my brother’s inconsiderateness, Master Cecils. He isn’t usually this way…”

“My goodness, I don’t mind. We can talk as much as he likes later. I have all the time in the world to indulge him.”



“Y-yes, certainly! Thank you very much, sir. Very well, I’ll retire to my room now, Elder Brother.”

“Good. We’ll see you for dinner.”

Joshua bowed and returned to his own room, accompanied by one of the serving girls. Cecils watched him carefully as he left, and he spoke only after the young man was out of sight.

“Hmm. This little brother of yours—would there be anything the matter with him physically?”

“…You can tell?”

“Call it intuition, based on the way he talks and walks. It doesn’t seem like there’s any one part of him that’s in particularly bad shape; it’s more like he’s weak overall. Born that way, I suspect.” Cecils crossed his arms. Julius was dumbfounded by the keen observation. In just a few minutes, Cecils had deduced the congenital problem that afflicted Joshua.

The younger Juukulius brother possessed a weak body. He struggled to perform even the most basic of daily tasks. He was more capable and energetic these days, but in the past, the young man had been prone to fevers that forced him to spend much of his time sleeping them off. Even in his present state, considerable care was needed any time he traveled very far. And so…

“Master Cecils, if you would be so kind, perhaps you could entertain Joshua with some stories of Volakia.”

“Volakia, you say?”

“My brother has never been outside Lugunica. He has striven to acquire all the knowledge one could hope for from books. Now, I would love for him to learn of things that can’t be found in books alone.”

“I see… You do care for that brother of yours, don’t you?”

Julius answered Cecils’s admiring remark only with a smile.

The spirit mage did indeed care for his younger brother. Joshua was his family, and that made him precious; he was a treasured younger sibling. However, this particular bout of consideration, Julius felt, came from something else. He wanted to widen Joshua’s vision. Perhaps he thought the expectation and envy Joshua sometimes looked at him with were somewhat misplaced. Regardless…

“I’m afraid you’ll be fairly restricted everywhere except in this house, Master Cecils. As such, I believe Joshua would make an excellent

conversation partner for you."

"Ho-ho, what a fine talker you are. If your brother is the bookworm you make him out to be, maybe I'll learn a little something useful myself. I welcome it!"

"I'm glad to hear that… Out of curiosity, what would you hope to learn?"

"Why, cool speeches and the most striking words with which to see off an enemy—naturally!" The forceful response left Julius at an impasse. Was it supposed to be a joke?

After that, he showed the Volakian, who had come with minimal luggage, to the guest room, laid down a few ground rules for him during his stay, and gave the man a key.

"You are an interesting one, though," Cecils said softly as he took the key and set down his bags. Julius, not expecting this comment, raised an eyebrow. The Divine General shrugged and replied, "Don't believe me? You, good Master Julius, are capable of remarkably gutsy action for someone who looks and acts the way you do."

"Certainly, no more so than yourself, Master Cecils—the one who ran past a guard outpost in order to come here and challenge the Sword Saint to a duel."

"My actions are *meant* to stupefy the world. But forget about that." The kimono-clad man never stopped smiling as he sat on the bed and fixed his eyes on Julius. "The beautiful cat-eared one you were with… Her opinion seemed far more objective and correct. To say nothing of the fact that I take you for one who typically and unswervingly follows the path of righteousness. Am I wrong?"

Julius did not offer an answer.

"That's just my little personal observation, of course, and it's always possible you're simply a more madcap person than you appear… But I have my intuition, and I trust it, even if it doesn't always work on logic alone."

Julius let out a small sigh at the way Cecils was speaking. He agreed that the "cat-eared beauty"—Ferris—had the right of it. To the bitter end, Ferris had opposed Julius's concealing Cecils at his mansion. It was unlike the purple-haired knight to try to talk Ferris into something like this, to beg that he not reveal the Volakian's presence to the other knights. It was enough to make one doubt Julius's loyalty to the kingdom—so why had he done it?

"I thought that was the question that might keep you up at night, quite apart

from the issue of whether your little friend would report me."

"…If you were to proceed by force, Master Cecils, neither Ferris nor I could stop you. Did my response at the tea house not clear up any doubts?"

"I'm afraid not. I think you know perfectly well, Master Julius, that with the empire in mind, I could hardly cut the two of you down. These swords are really good for no more than a bit of rattling."

Julius found himself at a loss for a response to the Divine General's forceful inquiry. But it was not, of course, because he had closed his heart off, intent on not revealing what was within. It was precisely the opposite.

"——" The words wouldn't come out because Julius couldn't find any. He had no answer for the question Cecils had raised. That was the problem.

"Oops. Have I put you in a spot of trouble? Sorry, sorry. How could I be so thoughtless to the very master of the house I'm staying at?"

Julius found that his peculiar guest saw through his flummoxed state with unsettling alacrity. With that, the imperial swordsman removed his weapons and stretched out on the bed. "Now, I think I'll do just as you suggested and get some rest—may I? It is something of a trick to run all the way here from the empire…"

"Very well. I hope you'll soon feel refreshed. I'll call you when dinner is ready. And I do hope you'll be careful…"

"To ensure no one finds out I'm the most powerful, most handsome swordsman in the Volakian Empire? I'll be on my guard." Cecils waved a dismissive hand at Julius, who nodded. The young knight had just left the room and was about to close the door behind him when he heard Cecils's voice again.

"I look forward to spending a few days with you—my dear coconspirator."

It was as fine an exit as if Cecils were the star of a story, and it needled at Julius's heart.

6

Several days had passed since Cecils's arrival at the Juukulius household, all without major incident. That was to say, there were no commotions or outbursts worth genuinely worrying over; it didn't include the minor fracases Cecils tended to cause around the estate.

Cecils Segmund was every bit the man his reputation made him out to be. Despite standing at the very top of Volakia's military hierarchy, he had none of the dignity that might be expected of such a revered personage, nor any humility with which to balance his title. He was always, completely and unapologetically, himself.

The swordsman was familiar with the maids and serving girls, and as Julius had requested, he frequently entertained Joshua in conversation. His words and actions were quite abrupt at times, but the utter lack of malice in them left no one in the household with a bad word to say about him. Such was how he seemed after several days.

"There is no way that's true. I can't believe how gullible you are, Julius."

"That's quite a harsh evaluation, I'd say." The purple-haired knight smiled drily at Ferris, who sputtered as the two walked down the hall of the knights' barracks. He had just filled the cat-boy in on everything that had happened in the past few days. Ferris now seemed convinced that Julius was swallowing the enemy's sweet talk hook, line and sinker. Even so, he had bowed to his friend's request and resisted any temptation to reveal Cecils's presence—indicating perhaps that the demi-human had a soft spot as well.

"I guess it'll be only another two or three more days till Reinhard gets back… But do you really expect him to fight this guy?"

"I intend to act as their intermediary. I do expect Master Cecils will honor his word to return to his home once he gets what he came here for. Until he achieves his objective, there's no telling what he might do."

"Even if he went on a rampage, Reinhard's the only one who could stop him anyway… He's a dangerous customer. But are you really sure about this, Julius? *Mew* don't feel like you're selling Reinhard out?"

"——" Julius didn't have an answer to that.

"I mean, you're keeping this a secret from him and everything… I know it's because we don't have a way to talk to him, but you're really going to just drop Volakia's strongest fighter on him when he gets back? It's obvious he's going to think you two are in league."

"In league with Master Cecils… Yes, I suppose it might well look like that." Julius nodded, forced to reconsider his own actions from this unexpected angle. He had understood all along, of course, that this course of

action could cast his loyalty to the kingdom into doubt. But why had he never considered that it could look like an act of betrayal against Reinhard? Most likely because…

"I never once imagined that Master Cecils might actually win."

"Yikes…" Ferris frowned; Julius's words were obviously heartfelt. His ears drooped. "Didn't expect that. Aren't *mew* afraid you're giving Reinhard too much credit, Julius? Not just to assume he'd win, but to never even consider another possibility?"

"…When you put it that way, I suppose you may be right."

He was concealing a Divine General in his house and trying to secretly arrange a duel with the Sword Saint. Despite these rather underhanded dealings, Julius truly never intended for anything bad to befall Reinhard, for he trusted him implicitly. The spirit mage believed with utter conviction that the red-haired swordsman would never mistake his intentions.

"But what about you, Ferris? Are you suggesting you can picture Reinhard being defeated?"

"Ferri can't do it, but his assumptions are completely different than yours."

"——" Julius furrowed his brow in thought, taken off guard by the depth of Ferris's response. Before he could query him further, though, the demi-human looked at the magic time crystal on the wall of the passageway. "It's time," he said, pointing to the crystal's changing color. "The captain wanted to see us. We'd better get going—we can talk later."

Julius was loath to leave the subject behind, but he knew what his priorities had to be. He and Ferris hurried to the innermost chamber of the barracks, the captain's office.

"Come in." There was a soft voice that greeted them when the duo announced their presence with a knock on the door. They obediently entered and found themselves facing a knight who looked so rough and uneven that he could have passed for a boulder. Short green hair framed his angular face, and his armor barely contained his muscles. This was Marcus Gildark.

"Julius Juukulius reporting, sir."

"And Ferri's here, too—ahem, sir."

"Felix Argyle, you mean. How many times do I have to tell you? Use your full name when reporting." With that gruff reminder, Marcus jerked his head, motioning for the two knights to enter. They stood in front of his desk as he

instructed them. Ferris fixed Marcus with his yellow eyes and said, “What can we help you with, Captain? Ferri’s very busy, you know.”

“You could stand to learn how to conduct yourself a bit more like a knight… Ahh, never mind. Felix, you’re not the only one who’s busy. I’ve got my hands full, too. Guess I don’t know if they’re as full as yours, having to work on behalf of Duchess Karsten to prepare for the selection.”

“…What’s that? I’m afraid Ferri doesn’t quite understand what mew’re saying, sir.”

“I mean your little side business as a healer. I don’t care what you do with that power as long as it doesn’t get in the way of your official duties. Even if you do go a little crazy trying to earn the duchess more supporters.”

“Hey! You knew I was trying to put you off the scent just now!” Ferris didn’t take kindly to Marcus seeing through his dissuasion, but the captain shrugged away the objection. He slumped his shoulders; the demi-human knew how ruthless the senior knight could be. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what I’m doing, and believe me, I’m working hard at it. So please don’t give me a bunch more to do as a royal knight.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take that into consideration. You are, officially, assigned to the royal knights. If you choose to use your free time to assist the duchess, that’s your prerogative, but when I need you, you’ll work for the knights, and you won’t cut any corners. Understood?”

“Boo,” Ferris replied, blowing a raspberry. Marcus ignored the impudent gesture and turned to Julius. As he did, the captain’s gaze became almost overwhelming. It was the kind of look that could crack a man with a guilty conscience.

“With the royal selection so close, the strain is getting to be too much in certain parts of the country. Here in the castle town, we’re hearing rumors about the demise of His Majesty, and others that even claim the entire royal family succumbed to illness. I’m sure you’ve heard of them, Julius.”

“____”

The topic Marcus brought up had nothing to do with Cecils. Of course not. If word of that Volakian’s presence had gotten this far, Julius had no intention of trying to deny it. He would confess to everything, knowing perfectly well the punishment it would bring down on his own head. Julius’s desire to grant Cecils the rematch he wanted was, in the end, simply a personal fixation. A desire, one might say, for something he himself did not have. A longing to

touch the hem of the cloak that belonged to someone who lived life according to his own principles so unabashedly…

"Julius?"

"…Pardon me, sir. As you say, captain, rumors are spreading in the marketplace. Many fear for the future of the monarchy. It pains me to say it, but your concerns may be completely correct."

"If the people's peace of mind could be bought with one royal guard uniform, it would be worth the price. But it's more dire than that."

Though it had taken Julius a beat too long to respond, Marcus seemed unbothered, only casting his gaze downward. Indeed, it had been the captain's orders that saw the guards making more frequent patrols of the capital. It had borne some fruit; public order was up, and the people seemed calmer.

"But that isn't everything," the captain added, as if reading Julius's thoughts. That was his line in the sand.

This leader of the royal guard, the man who stood at the top of the kingdom's hierarchy of knights, was the very embodiment of what people thought a knight should be. He was a friend to the downtrodden and always did his utmost to protect others. Thus, even if the man did all he could possibly do, he would regret anything that had been left undone. Even if no one criticized or blamed the captain, it was his own ideals that judged the man most harshly. He was not always an easy person to live with, least of all to himself. That was the way of Marcus Gildark.

"There's been a lot of foolish grumbling. The royal guard is to continue to secure the capital, while the rest of the knight corps applies itself to other parts of the nation."

"So we're to continue on as we've been doing, sir?"

"I wouldn't call you here just to tell you nothing's changed. As Felix says, we're busy." Marcus, putting his own feelings aside to keep the conversation moving, placed a paper on his desk and slid it toward them. It appeared to be some sort of report. "This came from one of the checkpoints on the border between the kingdom and the empire."

"…!" Ferris almost gagged.

As for Julius, he took the paper with no visible reaction. "Thank you, sir." The spirit mage ran his eyes over the report. It made no reference to Cecils. Instead, it indicated that permission to enter the country had been granted to

some messengers from the empire.

"Two envoys from Volakia have entered Lugunica."

"Huh, s-so that's it. Envoys, sure, of course. Envoys from the empire… Wait, what?! What are they here for?" Ferris's face went through several swift changes as he realized this had nothing to do with Cecils's unauthorized entry.

"Excellent question," Marcus said, looking at him sourly. "I'm sorry to do this to you after you went all the way to the empire and back just the other day, but we're involved with the imperials again. If I had my way, I would bring the entire strength of the royal guard to bear on this issue, but unfortunately, there's no one else I can deploy right now."

"Wait, wait, wait, that's not reassuring! Don't tell me you're planning to send Ferri and Julius alone to meet a threat you want the entire guard for?! That's nuts!"

Ferris's relief that this had nothing to do with Cecils quickly vanished, and he began to lose his composure. Julius, frankly, agreed with him. This was too much for the two of them alone. But "involvement with the empire" couldn't be ignored, either.

"Last time was nuts, too, but Reinhard helped us pull it off somehow, see? You just got the wrong guys. How about you have Ferri do something else and let Reinhard handle this instead—that sound okay?"

"Quibbling won't get you anywhere. I can't assign someone who isn't here. And anyway, don't get ahead of yourselves. I'm not saying the two of you will have to face down the entire might of the Volakian Empire by yourselves."

"But we know a fight is brewing, and that's enough for me to know that you've got the wrong guy!"

"Whether a fight is on the horizon depends on you two. And I'm counting on you to see that one isn't." Ferris, clutching his head, stumbled backward. Julius caught hold of him, and the captain merely shrugged. "My orders for you this time are simple. Accompany the envoys and help them do what they've come here to do. Then get them out of here with as little fanfare as possible. That'll be all."

"In other words, roughly a mirror image of the position we were in before, sir," Julius summarized, still holding fast to Ferris, whose eyes were brimming.

It had been a month now since Julius and the others had gone to the empire as emissaries themselves. Now just a few weeks later, the roles were reversed. It was hard not to feel there was something more at work here. Especially considering the distinct possibility that everything that had happened during their visit to the empire had been orchestrated by the emperor.

"We understand we're to meet and accompany the emissaries from Volakia, sir. But what have they come here to do?"

"I think it'll be easiest to ask them yourselves. Summon them here and—"

"That won't be necessary." A new voice seemed to slither into the ears of the three knights, and Marcus's face grew hard. The captain was looking at a tall, slim figure who was leaning against the office door.

"Many pardons," the figure said, raising their hand as Julius and Ferris puzzled over when they had arrived, "but I'm afraid I overheard some of what you were saying. My ears are rather too good, if I may say so." The man laughed, but it sounded strange, almost like a cough. He had a most unusual presence, with white hair, pale skin, and a white coat that covered his entire body. Collectively, it gave the impression that all the color had drained out of him. Even his very presence seemed ambiguous, as if he might not have actually been there. The man looked back and forth between Julius and Ferris, who stood at attention. "May I assume these two will be the good knights who shall accompany me?"

"…Yes, this is them. Julius, Felix. This is one of the emissaries from the Volakian Empire, Master Chisha Gold."

"An utmost pleasure to meet you." With impeccable politeness, the man—Chisha Gold—wore a colorless smile and bowed his head.

"Master Chisha—if memory serves, I believe you're one of the Nine Divine Generals, are you not?"

"So I am. Though only the fourth among them."

"Whatever you're here for, it must be a pretty big deal to bring a general on a foreign visit, right?" Ferris was bent on not showing that he was aware that Chisha's colleague, Cecils, had already entered the country without permission.

"Indeed," Chisha said, his lips splitting into a grin. "We would hate for you to think that the Nine Divine Generals are mere errand runners for the empire, but the current concern could hardly be left to just anyone. Thus, I

have come."

"Wow, talk about an introduction that gives you a bad feeling about things," Ferris commented, frowning. Julius felt the same storm of anxiety in his heart, the same sense as the cat-boy that this was no small matter. It was something important enough to drag a high-ranking general from the empire and demand the cooperation of the royal guard. It must have been something that touched deeply on the relationship between the two countries.

"So are you gonna let us in on the big secret? Master Chisha, why're you here?"

"I request your cooperation in securing a certain person."

"A certain person," Julius repeated. Chisha's portentous manner only made his concern grow. And then, as if in time with the ringing of the alarm bells in his mind, Chisha went on:

"It so happens that a certain character from the empire has made an unofficial visit to the kingdom. I am here to force him to come back home… Or if necessary, dispose of him."

7

The same time, outside Julius's house…

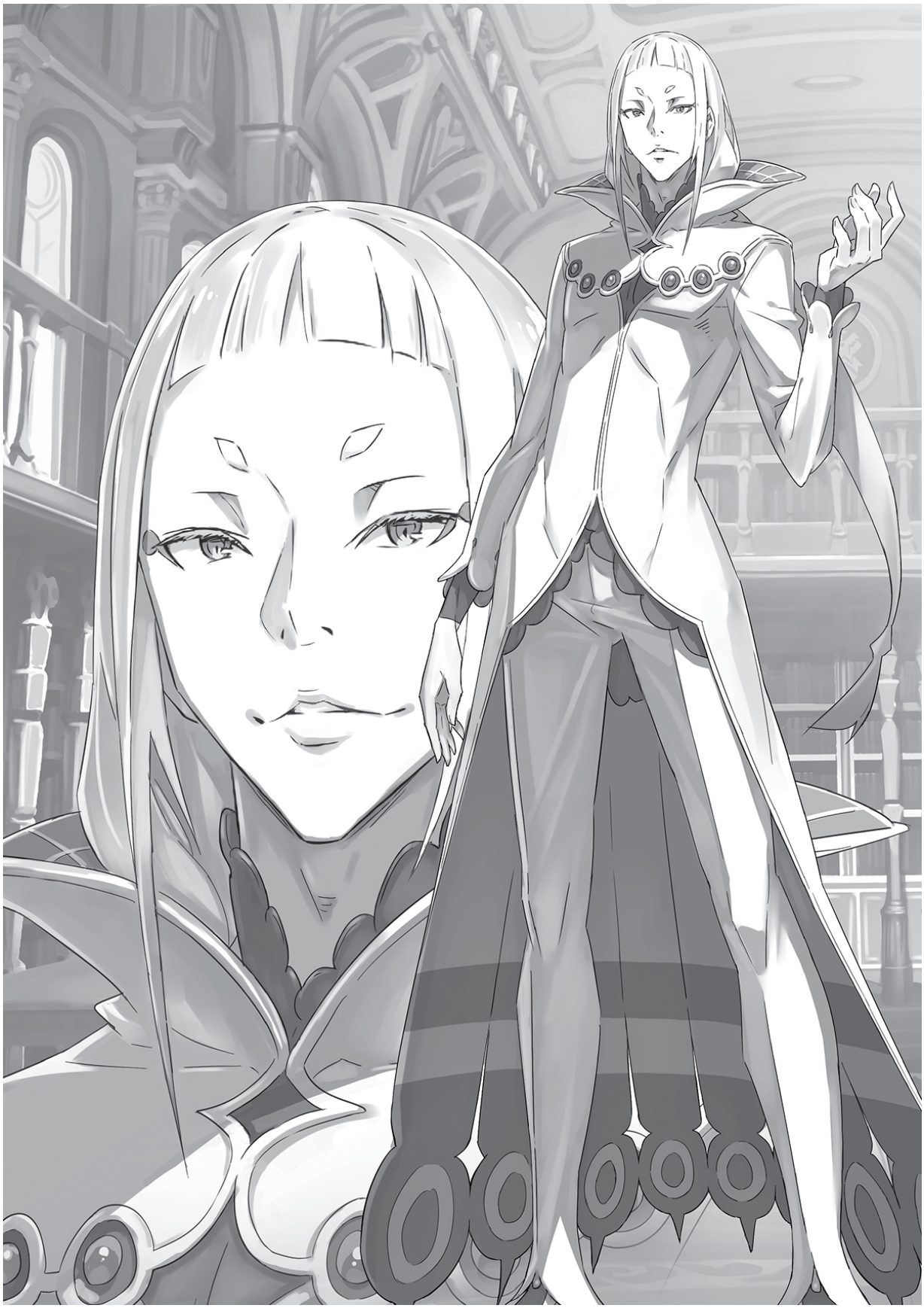
Taking a close look at the exterior of his designated room, Cecils felt for the swords at his hip. All weapons needed to be diligently cared for, but katanas needed more care than others.

These two blades of his, Murasame and Masayume, needed even more attention than most, as befitted two of the greatest works of a master swordsmith's art. However, the most important thing for keeping enchanted swords in good fettle was not polishing or honing. What they sought was respect for what they were. Enchanted blades demanded blood and death.

"All right, okay, yes. Just a few more days till the good Sword Saint returns, or so I'm told," Cecils murmured to himself, kicking his zori-clad feet against the ground. Above him, a light burned in the guest room, indicating the presence of an occupant. Joshua, most likely.

Joshua was Julius's younger brother, a boy with abundant interest in the

outside world, in heroes; he was one who might well make a fine audience member in the future. He held no small affection for Cecils. And every great man of the stage needed an audience.



It was a terrible shame that the boy had no talent for standing in the scene himself. His older brother, Julius, held far greater promise in that regard. He had the elegance necessary to shine in a lead role.

"Whoops, heh-heh. I'm not here to hold auditions. Much as I'm looking forward to my duel with Sword Saint, I can't forget the other reason I came." He slapped himself gently on the cheek, turned away from the house, and began walking at a leisurely pace. Julius had admonished him sternly not to take any trips outside, but he showed no sign of slowing down. He would do just what he wished to do. The greatest of the Divine Generals was indeed the very embodiment of the imperial way of life.

Thus, the Blue Lightning left the mansion without a care for anyone else. The man did not inform anyone, and completely unnoticed, the empire's strongest warrior meandered into the capital.

8

To bring back the unauthorized visitor from the empire or dispose of him…

Ferris stole a glance at Julius when Chisha announced his intentions. Even Julius was not so dense as to miss the anxiety in those golden eyes. The problem the emissary from Volakia had come to address instilled a great anxiety in the both of them.

"…Captain, we will accompany Master Chisha on his endeavor to apprehend this missing person. Am I correct in understanding that to be our duty?" Julius's face didn't so much as change a shade; the Spirit Knight looked completely unperturbed. Naturally, it was Ferris who felt deeply shaken as he listened.

Marcus, though, didn't seem to notice Ferris's uncommonly wide eyes. "That's right." The captain nodded. "I've explained to you what the kingdom wants. You'll work with Master Chisha until his business here is over."

"Understood, sir. Ferris, I assume you have no objections?"

"Huh? Uh, oh, ummm…no, we'll, uh, certainly do our best…?"

"You don't sound very sure about that. Say it like you mean it."

With the demi-human's stumbling acceptance, the orders were formally issued. Julius walked over to Chisha and offered his hand to shake. "I'm Julius Juukulius of the Knights of the Royal Guard. A pleasure to meet you."

"And indeed, you as well. This will be my first foray into the Kingdom of

Lugunica. I do hate to think of troubling you, but I'm sure I shall be needing your assistance." Chisha shook Julius's hand, then offered a handshake to Ferris as well. The purple-haired knight watched his fellow knight accept it somewhat hesitantly, then turned to Marcus.

"Very well, captain. If you've nothing further for us, we'll proceed with Master Chisha."

"Nothing from me. Make sure your behavior and actions uphold the honor of the royal guard." Marcus's tone was more formal now that a Divine General was among them. This last admonition seemed especially directed at Ferris, but in any event, the three of them silently left the room.

Chisha was the first to speak when they were safely out of Marcus's office. "My goodness, he is even more fearsome than rumor told. I thought I was about to break out in a cold sweat."

The Volakian was referring to Marcus, but from the lips of one of the Nine Divine Generals, it was apt to sound like a show of weakness. "I agree the captain's got a scary face, but is that something one of the empire's own generals should be saying? I thought any kind of weakness or fear was no good for your people."

"You wound me. Though, I must say, the empire's way of life rather disagrees with me… One might say it's only natural I should have wound up in the place I am now."

"You simply wound up as one of your nation's highest-ranking generals, sir? You are too modest. One's talent often brings about one's own destiny. Are you not living proof of that, Master Chisha?"

"I must say, I find the thought rather lonesome…" The alabaster man shook his head slowly. He responded no further to Julius's probing gaze but turned to look out of one of the windows in the hallway. "I pride myself on the elegance of our imperial capital, but I must say, your royal city has abundant charms of its own. Would that I could wander at my leisure through its streets…"

"Don't you think you'd have a little too much on your mind to enjoy sightseeing? Hope you can wrap up what you're doing and get out of here."

"Your consideration for me is much appreciated. Surely, one of the Knights of the Royal Guard could not rest at ease knowing an imperial like myself is traveling the streets of the capital freely. I suppose we will have to focus on business on this occasion."

“When you’re right, you’re right. I sure couldn’t ‘rest at ease’ knowing *that*.” Ferris shrugged but managed to shoot a glare in Julius’s direction. The target of the look hunched over a little, knowing he was being rebuked for hiding Cecils. Ferris’s eyes, though, carried more than reprimand; there was anxiety, too, showing a window into his complicated emotions at that moment.

And indeed, the demi-human knight was at the height of confusion. Chisha had come here to apprehend someone from his home country who was on an unauthorized visit to the kingdom. Ferris knew someone who fit the bill exactly—he was quite confident he knew exactly who it was.

I was against this from the start! he thought, feeling caught between his friendship with Julius and his loyalty to the kingdom. Julius, for his part, seemed oddly gratified by this agony. It proved, in its own way, just how deeply Ferris valued their friendship.

Thus, the spirit mage was eager to remove that weight from his companion as quickly as he could, but…

“Master Chisha, perhaps we might go somewhere to discuss this at more length. I have an idea. How about my house? It’s right here in the capital.”

“What?!” Ferris said, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head. The person in question, the one freely walking the streets of the capital at that very moment, was at the very place Julius intended to bring Chisha to. To Ferris, this was like a stab in the back after he had racked his brain trying to prevent just such a turn of events.

However, the knight merely winked at Ferris and said softly, so that only his friend could hear, “Don’t worry. I’m thrilled to know how dear you keep our friendship.”

9

“If you’re really ready to do this, Julius, then Ferri—then I, Ferris, can only watch.” The demi-human was obviously filled with sorrow as he watched Julius lead Chisha to the Juukulius household in the noble quarter. Of course, there had been no time to dispatch a messenger to let anyone know they were coming.

With Cecils hiding out at the estate, bringing Chisha there also seemed as if it made a meeting all but inevitable. Ferris could only assume Julius was

perfectly well aware of that. The man had already dirtied his hands with a certain kind of subterfuge against the kingdom. If this became public, it was conceivable he would even be stripped of his knighthood. Ferris's deep anxiety about that possibility was written all over his face.

Perhaps someone heard the slight young man's prayers, though, for it was not Cecils who greeted them at the door, but—

"Oh! Brother!" It was Joshua, looking pale. Julius frowned as he noticed his brother's complexion; it was even more bloodless than usual. "I'm so sorry! I only took my eyes off him for a minute…"

"Calm down, Joshua. There's no need to panic—just tell me what happened, one thing at a time."

"Y-yes, well… In fact…" But there Joshua stopped, for he noticed Chisha standing alongside Ferris. Then, recalling that his brother didn't wish Cecils to be spoken of too widely, he started again, choosing his words carefully. "In fact, he vanished from your room, Brother. Out through the window, it would seem… And his swords were gone as well."

"This is not good," Julius murmured, putting his hand to his chin.

"I'm sorry, Brother. It's my fault for not watching him…"

"Ohh, no, no, no, *mew* don't have to be sorry at all, Josh, sweetie; meowby this is a blessing in disguise. *Meow* we have a little breathing room…"

"Master Chisha, I must apologize. It seems the person you're inquiring after is no longer in this house."

"Wha—?!"

The fast-talking Ferris and the very deliberate, careful Joshua both looked at Julius, eyes as wide as saucers. Ferris grabbed Julius by the lapels, shaking him violently. "Why?! Why would you tell him that? I always knew you were too honest for your own good, but I never thought you were this naive! Ugh, you're as bad as Reinhard! Is that why you two are friends? Birds of a feather? Arrrgh, my poor head!"

"P-please, calm down. You're much too agitated…"

"And whose! Fault! Do you think! That is?!"

Finally, the cat-boy slumped to the ground as if he'd suffered a bout of anemia. Joshua caught Ferris and held him up while Julius straightened his own collar and produced a dry smile. "Brother, I believe he's right. Ahem, as he says—"

“Forgive me. But should I understand from this exchange, Master Julius, that you are already in contact with the one I seek?” Chisha interrupted, his almond-shaped eyes narrowing.

“That’s correct,” Julius confirmed. “He was staying here as a guest in my house… But as you can see, it’s led only to my embarrassment.”

“Indeed, indeed. He must have leaned on you after the diplomatic mission earlier.”

“Leaned on us… Well, yes, I suppose. But ultimately, it was my choice to accept him.”

From the way he answered, it was clear that the spirit mage intended to hide nothing, and Chisha began to see the shape of the situation. Ferris and Joshua, though, still seemed at a bit of a loss as they listened to the conversation. Julius and Chisha, ignoring the confused pair, nodded at each other.

“It seems we have common ground, then,” commented the Divine General.

“Excellent. If only… If only he’d behaved himself for another half a day.”

“And I had expected he would listen to me. Perhaps it was asking too much…” The pale man sounded faintly tired, and Julius brushed back his bangs to hide a sympathetic grin. Then he gestured to Ferris, who was still crouching on the floor, and nodded when he looked up at him with his golden eyes.

“Let’s go, Ferris. You said you would see this through to the end, didn’t you?”

“Hmmm… I don’t know why, but I’m feeling meowy left out.” The young man puffed out his cheeks, making his displeasure obvious, but he took Julius’s hand. Then they shook firmly and turned to look outside the mansion.

“This will be a fine opportunity for the sightseeing that Master Chisha wished to do, then. Plus, we’ll also find and apprehend the person he’s looking for.”

Chisha, impressed by the confidence in Julius’s voice, bowed to him at the waist as a show of respect from none other than one of the Nine Divine Generals. The purple-haired knight, seeing the disquiet in Joshua’s face, laid a gentle hand on his brother’s shoulder. “There’s nothing to fear, Joshua. I’ll be back with good news for you, as always.”

“Brother… Yes, I’ll be waiting for you. And praying for your success.”

With a nod from Julius, the three of them ventured into the capital to

pursue the empire's strongest fighter.

10

A young man wearing an unusual blue outfit and holding the hem of his kimono in his hand walked openly through the city. His zori-clad feet brushed over the stones, and at his hip hung two swords. He was a conspicuous figure even among the midday crowds on the main thoroughfare. Yet he himself hardly seemed to realize it. He was simply too used to being the object of gawking, such that he had begun to forget his own strangeness.

Then there was the burden the young man carried, of being the lead actor in the play that was the world. Of course, he would stand out; he *should* stand out. That was what it meant to be in the spotlight. And so in spite of his own responsibilities, he walked easily down the main street, quite unconcerned with any questions of position.

But sheer attention-getting wasn't his only reason for sauntering down the path as he did.

"I guess it's about time." He brushed his blue hair away from his forehead with a few fingers, then picked up his pace, almost gliding toward a narrow side street. Fetid air washed over him from the dim alleyway. It was amazing how the atmosphere could change so drastically from one street to the next. Ugliness hidden by beauty—that was the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica.

"The empire is *much* easier to understand; that's what I like about it. Everything you plan, everything you do—it's all about decapitating your enemies. Always clear about what you're up to—that's how violence should be."

"What are you babbling about, Bro?" A voice called out while the kimono-wearing man was rambling at the wall in a portentous voice. The young man turned around slowly to see the mouth of the alleyway blocked by several figures. Altogether, they made fourteen, too many to stand abreast in the narrow alley. It was foolish, the way they lined up in depth. The men all possessed fearsome auras, though; they were clearly no strangers to violence.

"Ah yes, applause and catcalls I welcome, but I must admit I would be all the happier if they could come from some women. What do you think, my friends?"

There was muted laughter among the men at this nonchalant greeting. "We

think it don't matter what you think. There'll be some screaming before this is over, though. From you."

Now the young man withdrew his hand from his kimono with an appreciative sort of chuckle. "There's nothing I like better than a bit player with conviction—but may I assume you're acting on your own judgment? I must think you've been told not to touch me."

"Fancy you, knowin' all that. Yeah, he told us to keep our hands off you, but what the hell—all work and no play, right? If we can go ahead and put you to sleep, it'll all be over in a jiffy."

"Yes! That's the answer I was looking for. Then allow me to respond in kind!" Laughing aloud, the swordsman in foreign dress took a step toward the defenseless ruffians. No sooner had he done so than each of the men drew something out of their pouch. Then all at once—or really, in the order they had lined up in the alleyway—they rushed at the young man.

The blue-haired wanderer crouched down ever so slightly as he savored the shouts of battle. "Now that's perfect cannon fodder—I don't dislike it, no; in fact, it pleases me."

Then a zori kicked against the ground, and blue lightning struck the narrow street.

11

"I must say, I imagine it might be more efficient to look for any commotions occurring in the capital rather than groping around in the dark."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because *he* is the kind who would go out to enjoy the rain in the middle of a storm."

Following Chisha's intuition about their quarry, the three of them headed for a guard post in the capital, thinking they might be able to find a clue.

"Are we sure, though? The guardhouses are always buzzing. Is that going to be enough to help us?"

"I should think we could at least narrow our search to places that have suffered some commotion," Chisha said.

"No, there must be a way to be even more precise," Julius replied. "There's one area in particular he's frequented on his jaunts out of my mansion during his stay. That man's hard to miss, so perhaps someone has

seen him."

Chisha squinted at Julius admiringly, and Ferris's ears stood up as he spoke up. "Wow. You mean you weren't just keeping an eye on him at home, but you were staking him out when he left, too?"

"You make it sound so devious. I simply had my Sprouts trail him in case he should find himself lost in a strange town. Even then, that was only at night."

Julius had assigned his greater spirits to this task as a sort of insurance, and now it was paying off. He only regretted that he hadn't imagined Cecils would leave the house during the day and so didn't have a spirit watching after him now.

"However, if his objective is in that area, then combined with your suggestion, Master Chisha…"

"A compromise between the two to find him. Very well, let us proceed as you say."

"Fine, do whatever you want," Ferris grumbled. The three of them headed for the guard post in the section of the city Julius suggested—which was where they learned of the gang of thugs that had been beaten half to death.

"We found these lowlifes in an alleyway, looking like death. Thankfully, none of them were actually killed, but something really awful must have happened to them—they're all furious about it. You want to talk to them?"

"Yes, if I may. Any of them roughly sane?" Julius asked, and the guard in charge of the detention center brought out three men. Each of them was quite distinct: One was massive, another, medium-size but muscly, and the third, small and spindly. None of them looked very cooperative, and their faces puckered when they saw a knight standing in front of them.

"G-geez, what's a knight doin' here? None of us knows nothin', all right?!"

"Calm yourselves. I'm not here to hand out punishment to any of you. I simply have a few questions about the man who worked you over. For starters, why did you target him?"

Julius was calm but got right to the point, and the three men collectively gulped. When Ferris saw they weren't eager to answer, he pursed his lips. "Just a second! Play along with us here. Trust me, if you don't say anything,

someone else will—all you're doing is wasting our time. So come out with it already."

"…Okay, we'll talk. But on one condition. We sing, and you let us out of this place. There's a bad vibe here."

"…Very well. I'll see what can be done."

The offer came from the second of the men, the medium-size one. He was young and possessed very sharp eyes. Julius accepted his condition, and the three of them visibly relaxed.

"There was this guy with a lotta, y'know, style," the young man said. "Gave us each a gold coin and said to keep an eye on that cocky kid. Easy money, right?"

"But it ended up being the most painful milk run we've ever been on."

"It's all because of those other greedy bastards; they went and got carried away! We tried to stop 'em, I swear!"

"Anyway, point is, we tried to do our part, and look where it got us."

The excitable smaller man and the glum-looking larger one both settled down as the one in the center concluded the story.

"Hmm." Julius nodded when they were finished. "And do you, perchance, know the name of the person who hired you?"

"You don't ask what you don't need to know. Stick your nose in too deep, and you never know when they might decide to cut it off."

"The only reasonable response," Chisha said with a shrug. "And they've no reason to lie—another dead end, I suppose?"

"No, not necessarily," Julius said, shaking his head. Then he reached out toward the three men. Their eyes were wide as he asked, "Would you mind if I inspected the gold coins you were given for your reward?"

"The hell? You tryin' to fleece us? You're a knight—that's, like, abuse of power or somethin'! That's our reward for doin' our job!"

"A pretty shady bit of pay," Ferris commented. "And then you didn't even actually do the job—that's just sad."

"Listen, kitten! Don't think you can mouth off to us just 'cause you're cute!" came the explosive response from the shortest of the three criminals.

They stared at one another like small animals in a face-off until Julius intervened. "Pardon me," he interjected. "Ferris, restrain yourself. My apologies for this misunderstanding. The money is yours, of course. I simply wish to inspect it."

“Yeah, likely story! You’ve done this before, haven’t you?!”

“Pfah. Give it a rest, Camberley. Here.” The medium-size man talked his companion down, then flipped a coin to the knight. It made a lazy arc, and Julius caught it in his palm. He felt the weight, ascertaining it was gold. The spirit mage nodded, satisfied, and tossed it back.

“Just as I thought… Thank you. That helps.”

“…We don’t care what country it came from or whatever; it’s our reward. You better keep your promise.”

“Should I take that to mean you do, in fact, recognize where it comes from?”

“Already told you, sir knight. Don’t sit well to go upsetting your generous benefactors. Not good to ask nosy questions.” The man in the center snorted. He and his two friends made to leave, and Julius politely got out of their way. The trio walked straight out of the guard post, but Julius called after them:

“You’re free to go on this occasion, but…I sincerely hope you won’t do anything to find yourself in the hospitality of the guards again. A lifestyle like yours all too often leads to an early death.”

“Easy for you to say. Me, I think the air’s too thin to breathe way up high,” one of the men spat. And with that, the three of them scurried away.

When they were out of view, Ferris exclaimed, “What is with them?!” and stomped on the ground. “The nerve of those guys! It drives me up the wall! Shouldn’t we have just left them here?”

“A promise is a promise. What’s more, they have some money right now. That means, perhaps, a chance to forge a new path in life.”

“Bah, I think that’s awfully optimistic! Their like never turn over a new leaf. I swear…” Ferris frowned, taking Julius’s faith in the men’s goodness as more than a bit idealistic. Still, his anger quickly cooled. “So what now?” he asked. “What’d that coin tell you? Did you get the name or the face of whoever hired them? Not that Ferri’s sure it would make our missing-person search any easier…”

“A fair point. Well, let me start at the beginning. First of all, that coin was not minted by the kingdom, but by the empire.”

“An imperial gold coin…? So whoever hired those clowns—”

Whoever paid them did so with imperial currency, thus implying a connection with the empire. But that didn’t make any sense. At least, not with

the information Ferris had. After all, Cecils, whom the men had been pursuing, was from Volakia himself.

"But if the person who was trying to watch him was from the empire, too, then… Huh?"

Julius put a hand on his perplexed friend's shoulder. "The answer to that is clear, Ferris. But first… Master Chisha." He turned to look at the envoy, who waited calmly for him to continue. "Am I correct that we are not apprehending the hunter, but the quarry?"

"Most wise. It is as you suspect, Master Julius." Chisha bowed to him, openly impressed. The pale general's superficial deference could sometimes seem to hold a veiled contempt, but this particular gesture appeared sincere.

Ferris, though, was completely baffled. "Can someone explain to me what is going on?"

"Let's start by clarifying your question. Right now, there are two mysterious members of the empire in your mind. One is the unauthorized entrant whom Master Chisha is pursuing."

"Right, and that's…" *Cecils, right?* Ferris didn't quite finish his sentence out loud.

"I'm afraid not," Julius said, shaking his head. He continued like a magician revealing the secret to his sleight of hand. "The runaway is the one who gave the gold coins to our three acquaintances and ordered them to watch over his own pursuer. And if so, what purpose do you think our mutual friend had in coming here?"

"You can't be saying what I think you're saying…," Ferris said, belatedly realizing what Julius already knew.

The other knight smiled as realization dawned on his friend's face. "We were told two envoys had come from the empire—Master Chisha has a partner we haven't yet connected with. Cast in that particular role is one General Cecils Segmund."

12

With the door closed, the room was dark and silent. Under guard, its occupant hugged his knees to his chest, chewing his fingernails nervously.

"____"

They were supposed to communicate on a regular basis, but the time for

the next report had come and gone. He had set the thugs to tailing the most awful killer in the world—a murderer who was after him. When his bodyguards had informed him that the man had been sighted in the capital, his heart had raced so fast he thought it might explode.

Fleeing the capital was an option, of course. But negotiations here were his last chance. He had abandoned his home country and ran to the kingdom in hopes of turning death into life.

He'd prepared a souvenir. Now he just had to get it to Six-Tongue. The man had gambled in hopes of doing just that. Now he was waiting to discover if the risk paid off.

"I will win. I can't lose. It can't end here… It can't…!" The man clutched his knees and prayed, trusting his destiny. But then, remembering he had no one to pray to, he took an audible bite of his nails. "Argh, when are they going to report?! What happened to those thugs?! Why aren't they here yet?!"

"____"

"Hey!" The man got to his feet and directed a shout outside the room. To his surprise, there was no answer. He frowned to receive no response from the guards who should have been standing just outside the door. Then he swallowed heavily, and in a panic, he scrambled for the sword leaning against the wall in a corner of the room…

"Hullo, hullo! Pardon me for barging in, Viscount Glamdart."

"Wha…? Ah…?!"

The door opened, ushering in a comically stiff breeze. No sooner had the thought registered than his hand, outstretched for his sword, was in the grasp of a young man wearing a kimono. The guest smiled pleasantly; he was holding a sword that shone with an uncanny light.

The older man knew the younger one, of course. Knew his name and how powerful he was.

"Cecils Segmund…"

"The very same. Player of the lead role in this world—and faithful blade of His Majesty."

"M-my guards… What did you do to—? Hrrgh!"

It was a foolish question anyway. In the middle of it, Cecils's foot met the man's stomach, and the fugitive—Glamdart—went rolling across the floor. He briefly caught sight of blood dribbling on the ground in the hallway. That was all he needed to know about what had happened to the bodyguards.

And what would soon happen to him.

"Now that just won't do, Holstoy, you old dog. When your plans have unraveled, you should see yourself off the stage without delay. The head of your double and your little gift to the kingdom… Truly appalling. A stupendous performance as the villain!"

"W-wait, Segmund…"

"But trying to make off with the empire's crown jewel, the sky-dragon tamer—that can't be allowed. Add that to the fact that you were the ringleader of the plot against His Majesty, and a hundred deaths wouldn't expunge your sin."

The enchanted sword in Cecils's hand glowed in a way no sword should have been capable of. The Divine General's eyes were brutal as he informed Glamdart of his crimes; he clearly had not the slightest concern for life. The older man, all too aware of this, clasped his hands together. "Hear me out, Segmund! The scheme against the emperor was of his own devising—between him and Balleroy! I simply—"

"I'm not interested in your excuses, and I don't care about your arguments. You targeted His Majesty's life, absconded with an imperial secret, and worst of all, you continue to cling to the stage when your part has been played out. Let your blood wash away your disgrace."

"Heeegh—!"

"Ahh, I'm so glad for your sake that I'm the one who found you. I'm much nicer than the emperor, you know. For example, you deserve to die a hundred times, but I'll settle for once." Cecils smiled and raised his sword, which seemed to tremble nefariously. Just a flicker of that blade, and the thread of Glamdart's life would be cut as surely as the sinews of his neck, his consciousness lost forever.

Why? Why, despite this terrible knowledge, did the blade look—beautiful?

"And now, farewell."

Those were the last words he heard before the stunning flash of silver descended toward his neck.

"That will be quite enough, Cecils."

"Oh-ho?"

A voice interrupted Cecils in the middle of his stroke, inches before the blade found flesh. The sword came to a halt, and its owner glanced over at the source of the interruption. He looked pained as he registered the slim, pale man standing in the doorway. But the other man, Chisha, looked no happier.

The two Volakian generals stood there, scowling at each other, then they looked down at the man who had fainted on the floor.

"There's just in time, and then there's *just* in time."

"Hmm? Say, what are you doing here anyway, Chisha? Bit of sightseeing?"

"I'm here on His Majesty's orders, naturally. Orders to find and stop a certain fool who went racing off the moment it became clear that the mastermind behind the recent rebellion had faked his own death with a body double and escaped to the kingdom. Do you need me to specify exactly which fool I'm talking about?"

Chisha appeared relieved, in a certain sense, to have both found Cecils and to have found him with his target still alive. The swordsman cocked his head at Chisha's explanation, then he saw Julius and Ferris behind him. In resignation, he sheathed his sword, but he stomped pointedly on the floor. "That's that; all cleared up, then!"

"Uh-uh! Nothing's clear at all, and I'll thank you to explain it to me!" Ferris burst in before Cecils could sweep the whole thing under the rug. Julius let out a sigh at the exact same moment Chisha groaned. They exchanged a look and then a shrug.

13

"As a matter of fact, we knew from early on that Master Cecils was searching for someone."

"What?! Did I let my objective slip? Very strange. For once, I thought I chose my words carefully…"

The four had returned to the Juukulius manor and now sat in a conference chamber. Two royal knights, two imperial generals, and one very charged atmosphere. That said, there was no bloodlust in the air, of course. The real problem had already been resolved, and the story was drawing to its close. Joshua had been relieved to no end at Cecils's safe return. All that remained

was to explain to Ferris what exactly had happened.

"You needn't worry, Master Cecils. You never once said anything to give away why you were really here."

"Well, that's a relief. Hmm? Then how'd you know what I was doing?"

"There was nothing in your words that exposed you, true enough, but you dropped clues here and there. Asking Joshua and the serving girls if they had seen any *'strange people from the empire,'* for example, and sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night… Oh, and I wouldn't recommend using imperial gold pieces at the marketplace again. That's the sort of thing people tend to remember."

"What?!" Cecils reached into his kimono and produced his coin purse, staring at it in disbelief. The fact that Cecils had used imperial coinage on the first day they'd met in the capital made him profoundly easy to track. The man was hopelessly unsuited to covert activities.

"You never got to exchange currency, did you, the way you went rushing past that guard post? Guess that'd stand out, for sure."

"And it led to your undoing. Perhaps I should give you *some* credit for maturing a little… At least you bothered to come up with a cover story for why you were here," Chisha commented.

"No, that was no cover—I am here for the Sword Saint. Both stories are true."

Cecils could have just as easily let it go without that bit of clarification; Ferris and Chisha had just been coming around to him. Now his fellow general was staring daggers at him again; the empire's greatest warrior hugged his swords and shrank down.

"But that doesn't clear everything up. It was perfectly logical to think Chisha was here after Cecils, so how did you know, Julius?"

"Simple enough. If Master Cecils were the runaway, Master Chisha and one other person would never have been able to apprehend him. There could only be one outcome against Volakia's strongest swordsman—it's the same problem you and I had."

"Ahhh… *Meow* it makes sense."

The spirit mage nodded. It was true that when Captain Marcus had called them into his quarters, Julius hadn't known everything. Clearly, Cecils had some ulterior motive, and in the worst-case scenario, it might've involved something harmful to Lugunica. Julius had found no proof that it didn't. Yet

much of his concern had been allayed by Chisha's arrival and stated goal.

"Embarrassing though it is to admit, I am not such a fine fighter myself, and Cecils would certainly defeat me in the blink of an eye were we to come to blows. His Majesty may order what he wishes, but the impossible remains impossible."

"Ah! Chisha, you're showing weakness! I will have to report this to the emperor! To think, a general of the empire mewling like a little baby! Oh, the shame!"

"…I'm sorry to say that if anyone is in for a serious scolding when we get back to the empire, it's you, Cecils."

"Why me?!" wailed the Blue Lightning of Volakia, but his fellow general replied only with an irritated look. The easy tone of the exchange suggested they were not merely fellows in arms, but good friends. Perhaps Chisha was supporting Cecils's endeavors, in his own way.

"Much as my own friends shore up my shortcomings…"

"There you go again, Julius, always putting yourself down. They call you The Finest—you could afford to act like you believe it sometimes!"

"It's a title I hardly deserve anyway. In any event, I strongly suspected that Master Cecils's secret goal, and Master Chisha's stated one, were one and the same. Considering how Master Chisha's alleged partner never materialized, it made sense to assume that was the role Master Cecils was meant to fill."

That was as much as Julius had grasped about the situation, although he had understood it quite thoroughly. Chisha nodded as he explained, and Cecils laughed uproariously. "Viscount Glamdart, he was the one behind the plot against His Majesty—remember? You were there. We were quick to relieve him of his head, but wouldn't you know it, it wasn't actually him! We got a report that he'd left a body double behind and fled here to the kingdom."

"And in response, *someone* went running off before His Majesty could even give proper orders. Namely, the empire's number one general. We thought he would at least pause at the border checkpoint—it never occurred to us he would enter without authorization. The thought made me even more pale than I usually am."

"True, I didn't have any solid leads, but thanks to Master Julius, I didn't have to fret about food or shelter while I went after the fugitive—it all

worked out."

Chisha's expression soured more and more as Cecils calmly described his primary worries. Ferris, meanwhile, turned and stared at Julius. "So *mew* had ulterior meowtives of your own for inviting Cecils home?"

"For the most part, I meant what I said to you. The one thing I struggled with was whether allowing Master Cecils to wander at will through the capital might not make things far worse between our two countries."

"In that, I concur with you," Chisha said. "Thus, I chose to come to the castle without my partner, even knowing it might be quite futile. My meeting with you, Master Julius, could be considered quite a stroke of good fortune—or perhaps…"

"…The work of someone who engineered it behind the scenes," Julius said softly, picking up on what the pale man was saying.

Neither the Kingdom of Lugunica nor the Empire of Volakia had the resources at this moment to conduct a full-scale war against another nation. The kingdom's throne was empty, while the empire was clearly afflicted with forces that would foment rebellion if not rooted out. And yet if the fuse was lit, there would be no choice but to act. Act—or suffer the consequent damage to the national standing.

"I guess we could call this a fire prevention mission, then," Julius mused.

"Hmmm… And you think we succeeded in preventing the blaze?" Ferris asked Chisha, not looking wholly convinced.

"For my purposes, and with your kind cooperation, all has ended well. The betrayer, Glamdart, has been apprehended, and I was able to locate our wayward general… Now we can at least claim that we entered the kingdom together."

"Furthermore, my house can say, for all intents and purposes, that it never illicitly harbored a general of the empire. That's provided, of course, that all involved will keep the details of this affair to themselves…" There Julius stopped and looked directly at Ferris. "Ferris, you are free to say whatever you will, to whomever you will. I leave it to your judgment whether to speak and what to say."

"Sigh…" Ferris pressed a hand to his forehead and shook his head. "I can't believe you, turning all serious at the last minute. Listen up, Ferri's been treated like nothing but a third wheel this entire time, and that's what you end on? Julius, you are the most selfish…!"

"…I can understand why you're angry. What I did was—"

"Argh, that's not what I'm talking about! How do I always end up in this role?" Ferris pursed his lips, pressing a finger into the cheek of the contrite-looking Julius. The taller knight twitched, shrugging his slim shoulders. "Fine, I forgive you," Ferris said. "But you owe me one. And believe me, I'll cash in that favor one day."

"…Yes, certainly. Thank you." Julius nodded and smiled, thinking how Ferris-like such sullen kindness was. Julius knew now the demi-human would not make an issue of his little deceit on this occasion. Filled with gratitude for that kindness, the spirit mage turned to the two Volakian envoys. "Well then, shall we go and make our official report about this fine moment of cooperation between the kingdom and the empire?"

It was the last little bit of cleaning up they would have to do.

14

"This concludes our report on the capture of the unauthorized entrant from the empire, Glamdart Holstoy. He will be returned to his homeland to face judgment."

Five were in the captain's office at the royal guard's barracks: Julius, Ferris, and the two generals of the empire were presenting the report before the room's owner, Marcus. The four had all agreed upon the details of their story, to which Marcus was now listening quietly, his eyes closed.

"Allow me to express our utmost gratitude for your prompt acceptance of our admittedly most uncouth request. It enabled us to prevent any further harm to the empire at the earliest possible moment, for which we can only thank you."

"…I'm certainly glad you were able to catch him before things got out of hand. And if my subordinates were able to be of help to you, then I appreciate knowing I made the right choice sending them with you."

"Our emperor, His Majesty Vincent Volakia, is a most reasonable man. I'm confident this case will not go without its rewards. Our fervent hope is only that they bring further honor and prosperity to both our nations." Chisha was careful to express his country's gratitude in the most elaborate possible terms as they concluded the concocted report. This time, they had agreed, it would be the empire that was in the kingdom's debt. It was an excellent

compromise.

Or it would have been…

"Juukulius, Argyle."

"——" Julius and Ferris, standing side by side, straightened up. Marcus hardly ever called them by their surnames. The captain's gravelly voice made it impossible to guess whether he was about to say something good or bad. The two of them waited silently.

Finally…

"…Well done, both of you. I hope I can expect the same in the future."

Julius and Ferris let out the collective breath they were holding. Then they each snapped off a neat salute to cover how relieved they were.

"Yes sir," Julius said after a pause.

"Yes sir, Ferri's on it!"

And that was the end of the matter. Obviously, they felt guilty about giving a report that didn't precisely match the facts of the case. But Marcus's final bit of praise for them somehow freed them of that feeling. It seemed to them that he could tell what had happened. Otherwise, how could they explain why he "happened" to assign Julius and Ferris to work with Chisha? To the end, though, Marcus's rugged face denied any attempt to read his inner thoughts.

"Ahhh, I'm so glad this is all over. I was told not to talk, but even so, I don't mind telling you; my shoulders were so stiff…" Now that the interview was over, Cecils stepped forward, clearly very relieved. Despite being at the center of it all, he had acted like a mute doll throughout the report—and now that the official business was at an end, he turned to Marcus with a pleasant grin. "Still, what a pleasure to come face-to-face with Old Cliffside himself, Master Marcus Gildark. I would certainly love to see what I could learn from you in a match…"

"The honor is mine. But I believe I'll refrain."

"Hmm, that's too bad. Really too bad." The Blue Lightning of Volakia slumped.

"Don't be too disappointed," Marcus said with the grin of a true warrior, an expression full of blood and steel. The captain nodded at Cecils. "I know of a much better opponent for you. He's just come back—and I'm happy to tell you he's quite open to the idea of accepting your challenge."

Julius started. "…! Captain, you don't mean—?"

"Aw, you've got to be kidding… You *are* kidding, right?" Ferris added,

all too aware of what Marcus had in mind. Their shock came from different places, but the result was the same. Their reactions hinted to Cecils what must be going on, that his wish had unexpectedly been granted. “This better opponent—could it be…?”

“The Sword Saint,” Marcus said, putting an end to all doubt. Then he added, “Reinhard van Astrea is awaiting Master Cecils Segmund in the training ground. Just…try not to kill each other.”

15

The training ground adjacent to the royal guard’s barracks was already beginning to fill with a quiet tension. This place normally rang with the clashing of swords as knights and guards honed their skills. But today, the soldiers all sat in the observation seats or stood by the walls, awaiting an impending moment.

“Well now, if this isn’t just the most ideal outcome,” Cecils said as he was led into the arena. He felt for footing beneath his zori, soaking up the countless eyes upon him. He was absolutely savoring the situation, while simultaneously looking forward to what would come next.

“I must say, I’m rather shocked,” Chisha said. “I thought the kingdom’s knights didn’t favor displays like this.”

“Ferri’s surprised, too. I never i*meow*gined the captain would actually go along with this. I thought he would bite our heads off.”

Julius agreed with their whispered conversation, but there was something else on his mind, as well. “Perhaps he simply wants to see it for himself—the silver-petaled dance between these swordsmen from the kingdom and the empire.”

“____”

Almost at the same moment Julius spoke, a murmur ran through the watching crowd. The cause was another’s arrival to the arena: a young man with hair the color of flames. His posture was practiced, his eyes as blue as if they held the very sky. The white uniform of the royal guard looked as though it had been designed just for him, matching the white scabbard at his hip; he appeared the knight among knights.

“Reinhard.”

Reinhard van Astrea paused and smiled at Julius’s voice. The Sword

Saint, returned from his inspection, chose a spot several feet away from Cecils and bowed politely. “A pleasure to see you again, Master Cecils. Permit me to welcome you to our kingdom.”

“And allow me to apologize for showing up without warning you. I thank you for accepting my impetuous request. Got to say, I’m really surprised.”

“Are you now?”

“Mm. Assumed you would turn me down flat. But I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

Reinhard only smiled wider at Cecils’s directness. The man in blue pointedly tapped the hilts of his swords, saying, “You must be tired after such a long trip, but I’m afraid I’m not in any position to hang around here myself. I know that makes things a little unfair—hope you won’t hold a grudge.”

“It was my choice to accept your request. I won’t seek any further excuses for my performance.”

“Ah, that’s a swordsman. All right, then—”

The precombat formalities concluded, Cecils went over to the wall and removed his sandals. Chisha took them from him, and the two envoys from the empire proceeded to have some sort of conversation. Julius took advantage of the moment to go over to Reinhard and speak to him as well.

“Reinhard, I must say, this—”

“Why’d you say yes to such an idiotic request? Are you as stupid as he is, Reinhard?”

“Ferris…,” Julius interjected.

Reinhard’s eyes widened, but he responded to Ferris’s attack with no more than a smile and a shrug. “I won’t deny I have a bit of a foolish streak, but I don’t think it’s idiotic to do this. Though, I am touched you’re so worried about me.”

“First Julius, now you, Reinhard… Nobody cares about Ferri’s feelings…”

“True, Master Cecils’s request came as quite a surprise. But the captain had a say, too. *Go out there and show him just how strong Lugunica is!* he told me.” Reinhard, trying to imitate Marcus, dropped his voice to a forced growl that didn’t particularly resemble the captain’s at all. He glanced at the row of high-ranking knights assembled across the training ground, the captain sitting among them. The craggy old warrior noticed him, grinned, and made a punching motion.

“I don’t think he can hear us… Can he?”

“This is the captain’s handiwork, all right,” Ferris said. “Maybe he’s madder at the empire than we realized…”

“I’ve heard the two of you haven’t had an easy time of it. So this fight means something to me. I intend to requite the kingdom’s expectations and my friends’ suffering.” For all that, Reinhard sounded quite lighthearted, still smiling as he turned forward. Julius and Ferris withdrew, and there was Cecils, waiting for the Sword Saint to make his entrance. Cecils Segmund, the most powerful fighter in Volakia, sandals off, his two enchanted swords in hand.

“Hold it, Reinhard,” Julius said. “We don’t have a sword ready for you. Wait there; I can have one prepared in a moment…”

Reinhard carried a sword that was like his own partner, yet custom all but dictated that it never be drawn. Even Julius had never seen it removed from its sheath. Thus, he assumed Reinhard would need a different weapon for this battle, but…

“Don’t worry, Julius. I have a blade right here.”

“____”

Reinhard sounded no different than he had a moment earlier. And yet his voice sent a shiver through everyone assembled there. The kingdom’s strongest fighter, the Sword Saint, was about to duel the empire’s supreme warrior, The Blue Lightning. The crowd, gathered in hopes of seeing the battle of a generation, would first be treated to the display of a legendary sword.

“The Dragon Sword Reid…,” somebody said aloud. Whoever they were, they spoke for all present.

In Reinhard’s hand was a sword both beautiful and terrible. The blade was unclouded, the steel so finely honed that it did not seem made by human hands. Rumor held that it was a gift from the Sword God. Legend told that it had feasted upon many lives, and that it had even ended the Witch. The audience members were one of the few to ever lay an eye on a near mythical weapon.

“So that’s the fabled Dragon Sword.” Cecils’s heart raced with excitement at the chance to behold the legendary blade. What he felt first and foremost was not terror, or even awe, but gratitude. “I couldn’t be more grateful, more delighted, or more appreciative to see the sword with my own

eyes."

"I'm not permitted to draw the Dragon Sword except against a fitting opponent. This bout with you will be only the third time I've done so… Indeed, you are one who deserves to face the Dragon Sword."

Reinhard was constantly considerate of others and was always respectful. As such, it was not unusual to hear him praise an opponent. But his compliments now held weight that went beyond the words he said. Julius, recognizing this, felt a faint ache in his heart. Could it be…?

"Cecils Segmund, general of the Volakian Empire, first among the Nine Divine Generals."

"Reinhard van Astrea, one of the Knights of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica, of the house of the Sword Saints."

Filled with respect for each other, the two men gripped their beloved blades. Then at the same moment, they burst forth.

"Now the time has come—"

"—To fight!"

An instant later, there were flashes of light and blade. The force of the exchanges stirred up a whirlwind in the training ground, and the silver-petal dance rang out, echoing up toward the heavens.

16

"You know, I learned something from the Sword Saint."

"Really?"

"Yes. I sacrificed everything in my headlong rush to become the strongest, until I discovered I was all by myself at the very height of power… But it turns out I wasn't alone." Cecils tapped the hilts of his swords, smiling brightly despite the wounds all over his face. "Being strong is a lonely business. There's no one around you. Yet no matter where you go, you're never truly alone. Our dear Sword Saint taught me that back in the empire."

The Blue Lightning had been defeated in that fight in the woods, yes, but far from being a sore loser, Cecils found meaning in it. And once he had

discovered it, he went to Reinhard, who occupied a peak very different from his own.

"After that, I felt I had to teach the Sword Saint something myself. I had to show him that he wasn't alone, either. That I was there. And there might even be others who stand with us. That's what I wanted him to understand."

There had been no time for a relaxed chat between Reinhard and Cecils. Thus, the Volakian general could not hope he had communicated as clearly as he might have with words. However, he was also confident that he had most certainly gotten his feelings across, at least in some measure—for Reinhard, Dragon Sword drawn, seemed to be enjoying himself as he battled the man in the blue kimono.

After their heartfelt match, Cecils and Chisha had promptly returned to the empire. Of what came of the duel between Reinhard and Cecils, the strongest fighters of two nations engaged in a clash of silver, little more shall be said; to do otherwise would blemish the dignity of that battle. However, the fight had left an unforgettable impression on one person who had been involved in this chain of events ever since one of the generals of the Volakian Empire had arrived: Julius Juukulius.

"You walked a tightrope there… Satisfied now?"

The question came from Ferris, who was visiting the Juukulius mansion now that everything was over. They were in Julius's room, sharing a drink. Julius considered the question. Satisfied? Well, what had he even wanted on this occasion? Yes, he had been on thin ice; he had involved one of his dearest friends in subterfuge and arranged for another to cross swords with a deadly enemy—and for what?

"In the end, perhaps it was…jealousy."

"Jealousy…?" Ferris echoed, and the purple-haired knight nodded slowly.

Yes, that was it. The prickling Julius felt inside himself sprang from a helpless envy of Ferris and Reinhard, who had already decided the paths they would travel in life. It chilled him to realize how long ago it had begun…

"The very first time I saw Reinhard… I believe then and there was when I gave up the idea of ever standing on equal ground with him. I might speak

only too eagerly of how I wish to be friends, how I wish to be equal to him, yet I had already all but given up the notion that I could ever attain the heights he has reached and ever see what he sees from there."

Then he had averted his eyes from this weakness, playing the part of a fine and knowing friend. His own insistence that he could never stand shoulder to shoulder with Reinhard had blinded him to his burgeoning jealousy.

"At first, it was incomprehensible to me why Master Cecils should want to face Reinhard, knowing he would never prevail. In fact, I think I deliberately chose to not understand. But now I see."

"Hmm?"

"Talk of 'equality' was simply an excuse, a front I used to try to distance myself from both of you. And yet at the same time, I had the gall to wallow in my loneliness when that distance opened up. It was the height of foolishness."

"So now that you've realized that…what does Julius Juukulius do next?"

"Outwardly, I believe he doesn't change much. I do mean to be friends with you two, on equal terms. But now I've finally comprehended what that really means."

It seemed to Ferris that Julius had taken an awfully roundabout route to get to what struck him as an incredibly simple conclusion. The cat-boy simply put his cup to his lips and gave Julius an exasperated squint. "Well, if that's what works for *mew*, Julius, then I guess that's all right. Plus, you've finally stopped going around looking all sad and serious, like you've been doing ever since we got back from the empire."

"Was it that obvious?"

"Uh-huh. I almost thought *mew* were eager to see Reinhard fight that guy just so you could feel better. Like a baby, that's what I thought!"

"I must say, even I'm not quite that uncouth." Julius rested against the back of his chair as if shoved back by his friend's particular interpretation of his behavior. There he stayed, soaking in the breeze that blew through the window, and the two of them passed a few minutes in silence.

Then Julius had a thought. "I suppose I do feel better, after a fashion. My doubts have been dispelled, and I've worked out how to express my feelings."

"I don't think you really have to do anything different—you're already

more than equal with Reinhard and me, Julius."

"I'm touched by that, Ferris, truly. But it's a matter of coming to accept it myself." The spirit mage shook his head, gently rebuffing the word of consolation, then peered at the bottom of his empty glass. "I ask myself whether I would be able to appear your equal were we to step onto the same stage."

"…! Does that mean you'll help out Ferri and Crusch?"

"I'm thinking it might be more interesting to throw my proverbial hat into the ring as a candidate myself."

"Pfft, that wouldn't be meowy interesting at all!"

"I'm only joking." Julius smiled. Perhaps the drink was going to his head; he didn't normally make jokes. Ferris likewise turned red when he saw him smile so, and they clinked their empty glasses.

The words spoken that night in jest would in fact come to pass. Julius Juukulius would join the royal selection as a knight, but not in the camp of Felix Argyle. Reinhard van Astrea would likewise play his part. The three of them, all friends, served their country as royal knights. Perhaps it was fate that decreed, from the moment one of them wished to be equal to the others, that their paths were destined to diverge even as they briefly overlapped.

The Silver Flower Dance of Pictat, which took place during the struggle between the kingdom and the empire, had become legend—and the second such battle, many years later and witnessed only by a select few, would bring more changes still.

But on this night, still unaware of the future, they were just friends sharing a drink.

The red-haired young man would join the two before long, and the three of them would talk and laugh into the wee hours. Thus, this is the perfect place for this story to end—for now.

<END>

AFTERWORD

Hello, Tappei Nagatsuki here, your light-novel author who is also a mouse-colored cat!

Thanks for hanging with me through everything in *Ex*, Vol. 4! This side-story series has reached four volumes now, meaning the world around the main characters is getting pretty fleshed out—I think.

As I'm sure I say in virtually every *Ex* book, I'm the type who loves to know what the side characters are up to, to the point where they start to steal the limelight from the main cast. The publication of these *Ex* titles is the best possible way of indulging that impulse.

Now, the story in this volume, with some additions and revisions, was originally serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*. Why did I choose to do this story now? The plot of the sixth act of the main series heavily involves Julius, so this seemed like an opportune time. I wanted to give us a glimpse into his inner world.

In addition, I was influenced by my desire to focus in on the Empire of Volakia, which I expect to play a bigger part in the main series going forward. Unfortunately, this left my illustrator, Otsuka, with a crazy number of character designs to come up with all at once. But doesn't the Volakian cohort look great?

Incidentally, your author's favorite is Balleroy! Isn't he just the most dashing, most sexy guy? Unfortunately, now he's dead! Very sad…

Your author can attest that seeing the material illustrated can lead to some surprising regrets. Even if that might be years in the future. When I started writing *Re:ZERO*, it was as a web novel on the Shousetsuka ni Narou site, so obviously, I wasn't blessed with illustrations to begin with. The story rolled along with nothing but text. Happily, the story was well received, and among my readers were some who generously did fan art of the series.

Ah, now there is a cherished memory: the very first piece of fan art I ever got. It was of a man some of you may not remember—and I wouldn't blame you, considering how many volumes ago he appeared. Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.

Yes, this very first piece of art was of the Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins, the disciple of Sloth, Petelgeuse. Overjoyed by this first drawing, I wanted to make more use of the character, so the number of Returns by Death in the main series went up twice. So this is a work where the fact that my readers are cheering me on causes me to kill off the main character more and more times. Kind of weird, sure, but I gleefully look forward to your continued support.

Just to be clear, I'm not specifically saying that the more fan art I receive of the villains, the more Subaru is going to die. That would be mean. (But remember, all things are impermanent.)

To Editor I, I'm sorry I couldn't stop coughing and sneezing this time around. I feel like the only thing I talked to you about was how you just don't get over colds the same after you turn thirty.

To my illustrator, Otsuka, thank you so much for creating no fewer than nine new character designs for this volume. The empire's forces are full of really attractive people, and you did a perfect job with them!

To my designer, Kusano, what a stupendous job on the cover illustration, packing all those characters plus the title into a single picture. The new logo is supercool, and I love it!

I'm writing this afterword in the midst of the theatrical release of *Bond of Ice*, to say nothing of the fourth arc in *Monthly Comic Alive* as well as the manga version of *The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*—in other words, there's a lot of *Re:ZERO* to go around.

I can't tell you how much I owe to all of you. Thank you so much.

To everyone at the MF Bunko J editorial department, to all the proofreaders, booksellers, and marketers, you have my thanks. So does everyone involved with the release of *Bond of Ice*.

Of course, I owe my deepest gratitude to all the readers who have loved *Re:ZERO* so much for so long. As it says on the book belly band, they've green-lit a newly edited version of the first season of the TV anime and a

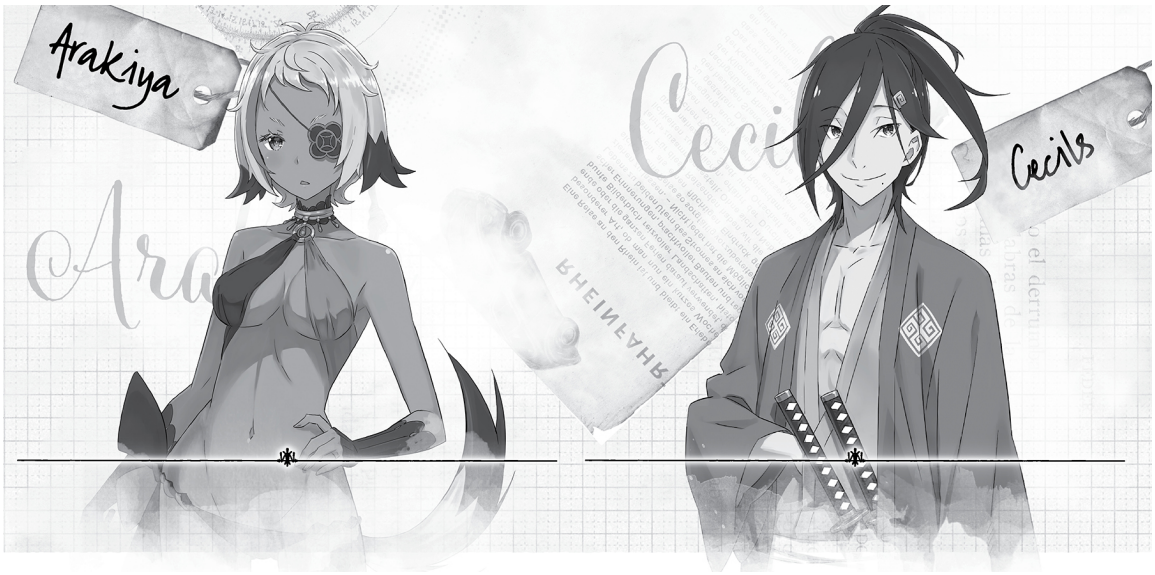
second season to go along with it. *Re:ZERO* is going to keep growing from here.

I hope you'll continue to support *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-*!

See you all in the next volume!

November 2019
Tappei Nagatsuki
(Wearing a sleeveless haori jacket due to a sudden cold snap.)

You'll see some of these characters again in the future, so look forward to it!



“All right, okay! It’s time for the next-volume preview! Your humble presenter, flower of this world and lead actor, Cecils Segmund, at your—”

“…No, stop. His Majesty will be angry.”

“Eeyikes! Huh? If it isn’t Arakiya. Where did you come from? We hardly saw you in the main story. You’re so lovely, but you lack presence, so it’s startling when you suddenly speak!”

“You can stop now… And I’m here on His Majesty’s orders. *Watch over the idiot*, he said.”

“Idiot? I must say, I can’t fathom who here would fit that description. Anyway, far be it from me to worry about things that won’t be fixed by worrying. Very well. Just try not to hamper my performance, if you don’t mind?”

“…Volume 22 will be out in March. Look forward to it.”

“Well, you certainly know how to keep things moving! Yes, yes, indeed, you’re quite right. In that volume, Master Julius, who was so hospitable to me in this book, will go on a grand adventure with his delightful friends to the Tower of Sand…”

“Further, there are plans for the birthday of everyone’s favorite devilish sisters, Ram and Rem, which is celebrated with such pomp each year… This year, it will be a double celebration at both the Shibuya Marui and Nanba Marui malls in Tokyo and Osaka, respectively.”

“Moving right along, are we?! Still, I’m most jealous of the newcomers who get to experience this for the first time. Good, very good. I can only

hope a similar opportunity comes to us eventually…”

“Further, the second season of the anime, and an edited version of the first season, will be broadcast…”

“You don’t slow down for anything, do you? Thrilled as I am to hear about a second season of the anime, I must wonder, what form will this ‘edited version of the first season’ take…?”

“The content will consist of the first broadcast season, along with new scenes, and some of the material reedited—a director’s cut… Or so they say.”

“So even those who already saw the first season can get something out of it, then they can be all charged up for the start of the second season. Wait a second—could whoever thought of that be a genius? Though, perhaps not quite as brilliant as myself, of course!”

“…Sure.”

“That’s the nastiest smile I ever saw. In that respect, you’re just like the owner of your heart!”

“…Cecils, I’m going to kill you.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, I assure you, I won’t die. Certainly at least not until I’ve watched all this new anime coming out! And anyway, someone of your skill couldn’t hope to kill me, Arakiya. Hmm…so were you simply blowing smoke just now?”

“I swear to my ancestors, to His Majesty, and to the princess, I will kill you.”

“Goodness, it seems I’ve genuinely angered you. My apologies. However, I am most disinclined to be dead, so I believe I’ll take this opportunity to get the heck out of here. Your presenter for this next-volume preview was the flower of the world, Cecils Segmund!”

“…He runs so fast…… I hate him.”

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink